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# School Leadership for Transgender Youth: A Case Study

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School Leadership for Transgender Youth: A Case Study

by

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A THESIS

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this case study is to determine which school leadership practices positively impact transgender youth. Understanding the lived experience of an identified marginalized, vulnerable group in school, who have been impacted by school administrators' actions and inactions, acts as a window into the relationship between the practice of school leadership and its impact upon a targeted marginalized group in public schools: the transgender student community. The study used qualitative case-study methodology and involved six participants in semi-structured interviews. The study participants attended one large urban high school and identified as members of the transgender community. The findings of this inquiry revealed that the transgender student community faces consistent and pervasive bullying, harassment and violence as aspects of their school experiences. In this study, all student participants described their experiences with current principal leadership practice as running along the continuum of offering minimal support and influence on behalf of the transgender student community to behaviours that contributed to further harm. Study participants indicated that their voices were rarely accessed to inform policy development in efforts to provide safety and support for the transgender student community. School experiences shared by study participants lead to an increased in anxiety and depression, contributed to their absenteeism from school and other social activity, and impacted their academic success in school. The study findings support that principal leaders' professional learning must incorporate the development of the knowledge and attitudes reflective of a social justice perspective that allows them to understand and support all students, especially those most marginalized and vulnerable.

*Keywords:* transgender students, social justice leadership, marginalized student populations

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## **DEDICATION**

To all the Educators in my life that made an effort to understand who I was, to make room for me in the community and offered me opportunities to contribute and feel needed.

To my Junior High School Principal, Mr. Ken Kilvert,

Whether one believes leaders are born or leaders are made, it is certain for me leaders have influence. I am so fortunate to have had a school principal that influenced me as you did. At a time in my life where I needed to know things could be different, that I had value, you provided that. You never gave me messages of discouragement or that the world was not full of possibility. You did tell me however, that generally success in life was significantly related to the work, effort, determination and perseverance an individual was willing to contribute. You didn't leave me to do this on my own but stayed with me until you were sure I could. I am sure that school leaders have the capacity to influence greatly as that has what you did for me. I hold myself accountable every day to this, as it is what I owe in repayment to you.

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# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction to The Study**

### **Introduction**

This research study seeks to illuminate which actions, and inactions, by school principals positively impact the experiences of marginalized, vulnerable students in school. More specifically, I seek to research the experiences of transgender students in an urban high school. Instrumental case study was used as the research methodology, as it creates an opportunity for the researcher to generate in-depth understandings of a specific project, policy, institution, program, or system (Simons, 2009). The in-school experiences of transgender students, insofar as those are impacted by the actions or inactions of school principals, will be of relevance to public school principals in supporting transgender students and other marginalized, vulnerable student groups.

Chapter I of this dissertation begins with an overview of the context and background that bound this study, followed by the problem statement and the statement of purpose that support the accompanying research questions. The research approach, design, and methodology are then considered, in conjunction with an understanding of my perspective in regard to school leadership and marginalized school populations. Next, I present a discussion of the research assumptions, as well as the rationale and significance of the study. The chapter concludes with the definitions of key terminology used in this study.

### **Context of the Study**

In my experience, educators are drawn to a career in education because they believe that the role of education is of great significance in society. They have a passion for influencing and supporting the healthy growth of young people and their communities. According to Fullan

(2001), the “moral purpose” of education serves as the basic stimulant for educators when working with students, families, and communities. *Moral purpose* is the intention to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals such as students and employees, and in society as a whole. This moral purpose must also extend to the larger role of transforming and sustaining system change within the organization (Fullan, 2001). There seems to be an understanding among educators that education has the potential to be an underlying equalizing factor in society that can overcome conditions of poverty, neglect, family of origin, geography, and socioeconomic status (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Holmes & Cahill, 2004).

In addition to wanting to increase students’ academic achievement and raise their levels of confidence, educators want to provide opportunities for students to explore their place in the world and to be both inspired and challenged by the possibilities that exist within their communities (Robinson, 2011). However, not all students’ experiences would indicate that this was the intentional practice of all the educational professionals they encounter throughout their school career. These moral purposes and high ideals, in and of themselves, tend not to be enough to sustain educators’ passion for the profession (Barth, 1990; Fullan, 2003; Robinson, 2011). If education leaders cannot support these moral purposes with actions that result in teachers being able to provide valuable learning experiences for all students, inclusive of the most marginalized, vulnerable student populations, then this moral purpose fades and gives way to cynicism, frustration, and limited commitment, negatively impacting the students’ school experience (Robinson, 2011). Marginalized, vulnerable student populations tend to encounter the most immediate and dramatic impacts of such shortcomings, because these students may have a limited support system outside of school and must contend with the most significant obstacles of oppression.

Demographic trends indicate an unprecedented and increasing diversity within student populations in Canadian public schools. Canada saw a growth rate of 1.1% from 2005 to 2010, which represents the largest growth rate of any G8 country during that period. As of 2012, over 20% of the Canadian population was foreign born. Over the last 50 years the family structure in Canada has also seen a dramatic change, with increased legalization of and access to birth control, no-fault divorce, recognition of common-law relationships, an increased presence of women in the workforce, and the blending of families (Statistics Canada, 2016). As the Canadian population increases, so does the expectation that education must be sensitive to meeting the needs of all students through the introduction of policies that support inclusive educational practices of students from a variety of cultural, linguistic, cognitive, developmental, and behavioural perspectives (Brooks & Miles, 2006). Educational leaders must strive to understand the issues before them, and craft leadership pedagogy that is sensitive to the available resources and the possible outcomes for the diversity of students, school staff, and community.

Some portions of society do not see the value in understanding the multiple realities that exist within our schools. Historically, in North American culturally dominant groups have investigated the experiences of marginalized, vulnerable populations when the impact of the relationship was negative or uncomfortable to the dominant group (Beachum, 2013; Foley, Morris, Gounari, & Agostinone-Wilson, 2015; Manis, 2012; Patton & Bondi, 2015). However, detracting from the richness, fulfillment, dignity, or happiness of another individual or group does not result in an increase in those elements for the dominant group. If the experiences of marginalized, vulnerable populations are not explored, understood, and remedied, as a society we all lose. Any failure to support the value and capacity of all reduces the richness of our own experiences and reduces the capacity of a significant portion of our community to contribute to

the richness of their own lives, the lives of their families, and the communities in which they participate. Further to this, dominance and marginalization fall along a continuum. Many people in this world, at one time or another, find themselves in a position or set of circumstances that contributes to their own marginalization.

Motivated by this moral perspective, governments, school board personnel, and school leadership are creating policy and changes in professional practice standards, in an effort to support marginalized, vulnerable student populations. The potential positive impacts of these changes for students are associated with Kohlberg and Lickona's (1976) stages of moral reasoning. Individuals operating within stage five of this model believe that people operate holding different opinions, rights, and values, and that these unique perspectives should be mutually respected by each person or community (Kohlberg & Lickona, 1976). These opinions, rights, and values are a product of the knowledge of those people in the context and discourse in which the knowledge is applied (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006). Stage five of the model creates a social contract-driven environment, of which laws are a significant aspect. That is, laws are created as social contracts that promote the general welfare of society and should be changed when necessary to provide the greatest good for the greatest number of people. This environment reflects a democratic process based on majority decision and compromise within the community (Kohlberg & Lickona, 1976).

However, this view seems somewhat reactive, as it implies that society's movement forward exists within a model of solving the next problem in a series of potential problems. This process seeks the expediency of a step-by-step approach in an environment where all individuals assume a role, and where legislation is constructed to hold these individuals responsible to their assigned roles. Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) in our high schools are a great example of this

process, as GSAs align with Kohlberg and Lickona's (1976) stage five of moral development and human behaviour: There is a problem, here is a solution, this is what the collective needs in order to protect this vulnerable group, these are the assigned roles, and finally, this is the set of rules that will govern what has been decided.

This approach is evident with the Alberta Government's response to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, two spirited and other individuals (LGBTQ2+) students in school, as supported through the introduction of GSAs. These recent advances in policy development, and the potential resulting professional practice changes in schools, as informed by experts, have an assumed impact on the actual experiences of LGBTQ2+ community. Policy documents and support system networks that have been implemented to support the LGBTQ2+ community in schools include Bill 10, An Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014); and by the associated *Guidelines for Best Practice: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions* (Alberta Education, 2016). Hereafter, both documents will be referred to as Bill 10 and Guidelines for Best Practice respectively. Introduced in June 2015, Bill 10 (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014) amends several pieces of the School Act, the Alberta Bill of Rights and the Alberta Bill of Rights. Bill 10 (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014) provides explicit protection from discrimination based on gender identity or gender expression. Key areas of this legislation relate to students code of conduct, school response to bullying behaviors, information sharing with parents/guardians concerning students, students rights to hold and run student lead organizations, guidelines for schools in supporting gender and sexual diverse youth and protection for gender and sexual diverse staff. Most specifically, Bill 10 (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014) states that schools must

support student initiated activities or organizations that promote welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments. These learning environments must respect diversity and foster a sense of belonging for all students, including but not limited to GSAs. In respect to the Alberta Human Rights Act, Bill 10 ( Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014) establishes that school are obliged to not discriminate, and where discriminatory practices exist the school has a duty to ensure that these barriers are removed providing all students with barrier free access to school programming. As legislative and policy initiatives progress, there still has been little discussion concerning the individual voices of the LGBTQ2+ students in the school community and their experiences in variant school settings.

### **Statement of Research Problem**

Where they exist in high schools, GSAs certainly have provided an opportunity for youth to find belonging, advocacy, and support. GSAs are school based groups that serve youth from varied sexual orientations, gender and racial identities by providing support and engaging in advocacy to address inequality within the school environment (Poteat & Sheer, 2016). GSAs not only seek to serve the needs of the LGTBQ2+ student community but also work with straight allies (McCormick et al., 2015). GSAs have reduced harassment and victimization perpetrated toward the LGBTQ2+ community, and students within the LGBTQ2+ community have shown an increase in academic achievement in schools where GSAs operate (Alderson, 2012; Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin, & Drechsler, 2012; Taylor et al., 2008; Wells, Roberts, & Allan, 2012). However, in most of these districts the debate continues among school officials, parents, community members, and district politicians about the need and appropriateness of GSAs (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2009).

It appears that although GSAs have contributed positively to the personal and educational experiences of the LGBTQ2+ community, this foundation continues to be unstable (GLSEN, 2009). As significant players within society run the continuum from intolerance to tolerance, acceptance, and inclusivity, it is important to celebrate how far advocacy for GSAs and the LGBTQ2+ community has come within North American society. Although GSAs seek to create safer and more inclusive places for all students and are bringing awareness to the circumstances faced by LGBTQ2+ students in public high schools, GSAs are only one part of a much larger picture.

Political and social issues within the larger context of society indicate that while there is recognition of the LGBTQ2+ community by virtue of equal rights, equal participation, and recognition legislation, de jure equality of a marginalized group does not ensure de facto integration of its members into the larger society (Miceli, 2005). According to Solomon (2012), western cultures are so comfortable with binaries that if rules cannot be maintained a concern emerges that many aspects of culture once seen as certain are now inconsistent and open to significant interpretation. Such cultures tend to look at legislation and social policy as a practice of separating good and evil, as in the case gender identity, keeping men masculine and women feminine. A realistic assessment of the situation indicates that advocacy for GSAs and the LGBTQ2+ community must continue further pushing the agenda of acceptance and inclusion (Alderson, 2012; Wells et al., 2012). This requires a shift from the value of “tolerating” diversity to a transformational commitment to equity (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009, p. 22). Within the tolerance paradigm, the heteronormative dominant group continues to exercise power over the marginalized, vulnerable group, and dictates the new definition of what is to be tolerated. The message given by the dominant group is one of privilege, as in “look what we are doing for you

. . . look what we are letting you do” (p. 22). Environments that represent a healthy shift away from tolerance can be described as *culturally proficient*. Terrell and Lindsey (2009) described this as a shift away from the dominant group view regarding “underperforming” demographic groups as problematic, and toward embracing these groups and valuing them as an aspect of a rich diverse community. Cultural proficiency becomes less about what we do and far more about who we are, in the sense that our actions are guided by a moral, ethical commitment to ourselves and others in our community, rather than being dictated by roles, policies, or legislation.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study is to determine which school leadership practices positively impact transgender youth. Understanding the lived experience of an identified marginalized, vulnerable group in school, who have been impacted by school administrators’ actions and inactions, acts as a window into the relationship between the practice of school leadership and its impact upon a targeted marginalized group in public schools: the transgender student community.

This study encompasses the concepts of leadership ethics and moral purpose in educational leadership action. According to Heck and Hallinger (2005), the current educational leadership research and literature support the notion that educational leaders are required to fall back upon their individual judgement, guided by a humanistic and moral purpose, because the nature and complexity of issues faced by educational leaders are far too diverse to be dictated by policy, rules, and regulations.

Society’s awareness of the circumstances of the LGBTQ2+ community in schools has increased, and a North American movement spearheaded by youth and their adult supporters has been gaining momentum, calling attention to this once invisible minority. The establishment of



GSAs in schools is one of the most significant strategies for addressing the needs of LGBTQ2+ students (GSA Network, 2010). Recently, the establishment of GSAs in schools has morphed and transitioned from looking at the experiences of all members of the LGBTQ2+ community to a focus on students identifying as transgender. The current political and social agenda offers a valuable opportunity to capture through case study the lived experience of transgendered students in schools, and the implications for professional educational leadership practice at the principal level.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do transgender youth experience various principal leadership practices?
2. How can the implementation of policy by a school principal be best facilitated, so that the targeted group experiences the intended benefits for which the policy was created?
3. What are the principal leadership practices that positively impact transgender youth in school?

### **Research Approach**

The experiences of transgender students in high school is explored through case study. Current media and educational literature acknowledge the North American transgender population as an identified, marginalized, vulnerable population (Alderson, 2012; Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin, & Dressler, 2012; GLSEN, 2009; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Wells et al., 2012). Conducting semi-structured interviews with six students, three transmale, two transfemale and one identifying as non binary, supported me in gathering information to understand the principal leadership practices that have a positive impact on the lived school experiences of this group of students. Student participants in this study were all

registered students in a large urban high school at the time of their interview. Participant sampling for this research study can be considered both purposeful sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) as well as convenience sampling (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). There was no mention or activity between me, the researcher, and perspective study participants in regard to the proposed research prior to the initial research introductory meeting. Issues of the study participant sample and the ethical considerations of relationship between myself, the researcher, and student study participants are discussed in more depth in Chapter III.

The emergent recognition of the transgender population as being marginalized and vulnerable within North American society has led to significant efforts through legislation and public debate to support this group. In the Province of Alberta, the introduction of Bill 10 (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014), and the associated *Guidelines for Best Practice* (Alberta Education, 2016) are evidence of specific political policy implementation in support of transgender students. These documents, as well as the semi-structured interviews and the corresponding notes, serve as the research evidence in this study.

### **Research Perspectives**

I have worked in the education system for more than 20 years, as an educational behavioural assistant, counsellor, teacher, system specialist, curriculum leader, assistant principal, and principal. I have been a principal for 14 years in four locations. Currently I am school principal in the school district where this study takes place. Chapter III of this dissertation addresses a number of ethical considerations in recognition of my role as principal and researcher. Simply stated, I believe the relationship of trust I have been able to establish with the students I have worked with over my career and my specific, current knowledge of the high school system from which the research participants receive their high school program will help

inspire these students to share their authentic, meaningful experiences. It is possible that the relationship between a school principal, even though not at the student's school, and students is perceived as having a significant power dynamic that would limit a student's comfort in sharing their experiences. Dual relationships are sometimes difficult to avoid in educational research due to the complex and extended interpersonal, professional and clinical network linking the researcher, practitioner, client and the community under consideration. Dual relationships if they are neither sexual nor exploitative are not inherently problematic. These relationships may encounter fewer hurdles in regards to building relationships of trust between the researcher and marginalized community (Adams et al., 2017). Student study participants were informed that the researcher was the principal of a school that included the highest number of youth identifying as transgender in the jurisdiction, and it was through this experience that the researcher developed an interest in understanding how transgender youth experience school principal leadership. According to Adams et al. (2017) all researchers would benefit from spending personal and professional time within the transgender community, fostering a familiarity and trust as well as an invitation to receive feedback and suggestions. Student were informed that participation was voluntary and that they had the opportunity to withdraw throughout the study process. Throughout the research project, I was very cognizant and reflective of the potential power differential of the dual relationship that exists. Current research concerning the experiences of out transgender students in high school is important. Failing to meaningfully incorporate the transgender community into current research can result in silencing and making more invisible and already marginalized, complex community (Adams et al., 2017).

My own learning path provides evidence of how and why I have arrived at this point in my personal and professional life that supports this research study. As a youth I experienced

poverty, homelessness, abuse, death of a parent, child welfare, foster care, adoption, criminal activity, and many other situations that supported a sense that I was outside the margins of what I considered mainstream. My experiences as a student in grade school reflected the turmoil of my life.

When I graduated from university with a teaching degree, there were few positions available in education. As a result, I explored employment positions where I could use my personal experience and teaching degree. I worked in multiple agencies supporting youth and families that had status under the Child Welfare Act. These experiences, combined with my teaching qualifications, eventually led to my working as a teacher in my current school board, where I have supported programming in community settings as well as special education settings. My career has provided me opportunities to work in programs offered in hospitals, secure facilities, and intervention programs for students excluded from community school placements. In my work with this very complex group of young people, I recognized that I had the potential to support them in creating positive futures. I felt obligated to return to school to explore factors that increased the likelihood of young people making a positive life progression after experiencing setbacks and/or trauma. The concept of resiliency was the basis of my master's degree work. Specific to my inquiry was the capacity of a community to reduce the impact of trauma for youth by ensuring that well-known protective factors are considered as a foundational aspect of community development. An unintended discovery of this work was the limited involvement of youth in the creation of community support mechanisms intended to support their resiliency.

When the Youth Criminal Justice Act (Government of Canada, 2002b) replaced the Young Offenders Act (Government of Canada, 2002a), I was the principal of the school program

in one of the largest facilities for incarcerated youth in the country. Under the Young Offenders Act, the rate at which young people returned to jail after having been incarcerated—known as the rate of recidivism—was greater than 90% (Latimer, 2001). I was curious about why such a costly system appeared to be so ineffective at reducing youth crime. I inquired as to our students' input into the new legislation and began to understand that it was minimal.

These personal, academic, and professional experiences (among others) illuminated for me that significant social, political, and economic decisions targeted toward the best interests of youth are often directed by adult experts, with no input from the youth who will be impacted. These adult experts continue to be surprised when the strategies and programming fail to produce significant change. I was determined to be mindful of this and, as an aspect of my professional principal leadership practice, to access the voice of students and regard it as crucial to informing the development of school programming.

### **Research Assumptions**

Several important assumptions are related to this research study. First, it is predicated on the assumption that a significant power imbalance in North American society contributes to the marginalization of segments of society. This marginalization occurs in consideration of social, political, and economic situations that exist for individuals or identifiable groups within society. The study also assumes that the leadership role of the school principal is a formal one, although leadership within schools can reflect a shared leadership model where many professionals assume both formal and informal leadership roles. Another significant assumption was that the research participants would be accessible and would agree to participate in the study—that they would have or would develop a relationship with the researcher that permitted them to answer sensitive, personal questions in an open and honest way. Lastly, I assumed that the use of case

study methodology, the research questions, and the research methodology (purposeful sampling, semi-structured interviews, interview notes, and the incorporation of specific documents) were appropriate to the problem being studied.

### **Rationale and Significance**

Ideally, conclusions from this study are relevant for school principals who are interested in developing their leadership capacity so that all students will have access to programming and support for learning that promotes the success of all students, inclusive of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups or individuals. In the case of this particular research study, the experiences of transgender students in an urban high school provided the case for consideration. Findings from this study are focused on the leadership behaviours of the school principal, and the impacts these behaviours have had for transgender students in the school.

The knowledge and learning from this study provides new insight regarding the principal leadership practices that impact marginalized, vulnerable students within a school population. Evaluation of effective principal leadership practice is often based on achievement outcomes and school culture survey assessment data. However, these measures provide insight into the effectiveness of principal leadership competency only as it relates to the demographic of the school. Before any comparative statements of effective principal leadership can be made, the political, social, and economic makeup of the school must be considered as well. By examining the experiences of a significant marginalized, vulnerable student population, this study uncovers principal leadership practices that are both helpful and harmful in promoting success for these students.

As mentioned previously, understanding and addressing the experiences of a marginalized, vulnerable population will enhance and improve the lives of all. From a societal

and community standpoint, we are all affected by our own or others' marginalization in various ways.

Finally, the knowledge gained from this study can guide principal leadership practice, policy creation, and implementation, as well as future research. This study provides a starting point for critical discourse with a diverse audience, not only about how students experience inclusion within North American public schools, but also about principal's leadership capacity to support the most marginalized, vulnerable individuals and groups.

## Definitions of Key Terminology

A number of key terms are defined specifically for the purposes of the research study:

- **Case study.** An in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program, or system in the context of the everyday lives of community members (Simons, 2009).
- **Cisgender.** A person whose gender identity and natal sex align with conventional binary expectations of male or female (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017).
- **Coming out.** The process through which an individual recognizes their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and integrates this knowledge into their personal and social lives (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017).
- **Gender Expression.** The manner in which individuals express their gender identity to others. A person's gender expression is often based on conventional binary models of gender, which is stereotypically male or female. Some individuals choose to express themselves in terms of a multiple model of gender, mixing both male and female expressions as they do not see themselves as being either stereotypically male or female, but a combination of both or neither gender (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017).
- **Gender Identity.** An individual's internal sense or feeling of being male or female. This may or may not be that same as the individual's natal/biological sex (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017) .
- **Gender Fluid.** Refers to an individual's gender identity that may vary over time. A gender fluid individual may identify as male, female, neutrois, non-binary, or some combination of identities (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017).



- **Heteronormative.** The belief that people fall into distinct and complementary genders (men and women) with natural roles in life. It asserts that heterosexuality is the only sexual orientation and norm, marginalizing everything outside of the ideals of heterosexuality, monogamy, and conformity. When other sexualities are acknowledged in this worldview, they are seen as inferior or intrinsically wrong (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017).
- **Instrumental case study.** A case study used to provide insight, where the case becomes secondary as it plays a supportive role in facilitating understanding of a generalized experience, theory, or issue (Stake, 1995).
- **Non-Binary.** An inclusive category for gender identities that are not exclusively man or woman (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017).
- **LGBTQ2+.** The acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, two spirited and other individuals. This collective term represents people of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017).
- **Qualitative research.** A research approach suited to promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity from the perspective of the research participants. This approach emphasizes exploration, discovery, and description (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).
- **Social justice leadership.** A concept of leadership based on ethics of care and the moral imperative of improving practice and student outcomes for minority, economically disadvantaged, female, LGBTQ2+, and other students who have not traditionally done well in school (Brooks & Miles, 2006).

- **Transfemale.** An individual who has transitioned from natal male to female (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017).
- **Transgender.** An individual whose gender identity is not congruent with his or her natal sex (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017).
- **Transmale.** An individual who has transitioned from natal female to male (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017).
- **Transphobia.** Discrimination, fear or dislike of transgender people specifically, or gender-nonconforming people more generally (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2017).

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

Given the importance of formal public schooling in North American society, it is necessary to consider the impact that the experience of public schooling has on all students. We sometimes hear, through media sources, of the student who proved to be a genius in an area of study or who contributed significantly to an art exhibition, theatre production, technical expo, or athletic competition. These results are often extrapolated to support the conclusion that our formal public school system provides opportunities for all students to achieve at their highest capacity. Often, however, these media reports are highlights of student experiences within North American public schools and may not be the typical experience of most students. This inquiry addresses the responsibility of the formal public school system leadership at the principal level to support students in an environment that ensures equity, fairness, caring, understanding, and advocacy for all students.

To conduct this inquiry, it is important to understand emerging themes in current academic literature on the subject of principal leadership practice for marginalized, vulnerable student populations. The current chapter, Chapter II, starts with a discussion in regard to the school experiences of marginalized, vulnerable student populations, such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, two spirited and other individuals (LGBTQ2+) community, and particularly the transgender student population that will be the focus of the case study used for this research. Issues of dominance and hegemony are explored to help illuminate ideas of how social, political, and economic power are viewed and shared in North American

Society. Critical theory is offered as a means of discourse in the deconstructing of this power dominance and hegemony.

Chapter II sets the context for schools as environments that can support social justice and democracy, by providing a brief examination of the possibility of public schools as a critical arena for social change. Next, the chapter discusses the implications for school principals to operate within a model of social justice and democracy within the school community, where the principal has the responsibility to operate from a moral, ethical stance to improve the conditions of all students and close the achievement gap that exists for marginalized, vulnerable student groups. The chapter concludes with a discussion about eliciting student voice to inform principal leadership practice in schools.

### **LGBTQ2+ Students' Experiences**

When students' experiences are negative as the result of an unsupportive, unsafe, and uncaring school environment, the students' learning is impaired (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). *School climates*, as defined by Horowitz and Hansen (2008), reflect the feelings people have about school, the degree to which learning can occur, and the warmth, friendliness, and safety people sense about the school. Components of a healthy school climate include equity and fairness, caring and sensitivity, peer relationships among students, and student–teacher relationships (Noddings, 2005a). Specific school leadership action is necessary to make schools safe, welcoming, respectful communities of learning that value all people, students, faculty, families, and community members (Savage & Harley, 2009).

Foucault (1990) maintained that schools reproduce society's master narratives of proclaimed truths, thus dictating the actions and knowledge that are deemed good, moral, and safe within communities. These entrenched truths leave little space for reflection and prohibit the

recognition of individuals who have an alternative expression of self. School culture is seen as a reflection of society at large (Savage & Harley, 2009). School programming, both curricular and extracurricular, reflects these master narratives and proclaimed truths. Students are also constantly exposed to a significant bias toward the traditional binary related to gender, heterosexism, transphobia and homophobia (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003), which reinforces negative views and stereotypes of any sexual orientation or gender identity other than cisgender, heterosexuality, and result in a contemporary society and school culture that tend to be morally conservative overall, creating vulnerability and marginalization for the LGBTQ2+ community (Savage & Harley, 2009).

Recently there has been a significant movement within North American society to acknowledge and be inclusive of the LGBTQ2+ community within the dominant culture (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Rottmann, 2006). LGBTQ2+ youth in schools self-identify and come out at earlier ages, actively support one another, and find increasing advocacy from within and from outside of the LGBTQ2+ community, which in turn increases the visibility, support, and safety of LGBTQ2+ students in school (Alderson, 2012; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Wells et al., 2012). However, school policy and school leadership practice have not always kept up with these advances (Holmes & Cahill, 2004). Students therefore often come out in schools that cannot guarantee their safety against verbal and physical attack from other students, and rarely find themselves represented in school curricula (Alderson, 2012; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Holmes & Cahill, 2004; Wells et al., 2012). A fair and inclusive education is not possible for LGBTQ2+ students when their physical and emotional safety is routinely compromised (Alderson, 2012; Savage & Harley, 2009; Taylor et al., 2008; Wells et al., 2012).

LGBTQ2+ students face all the same challenges as other adolescents, with the added challenge of coming to terms with their sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Horowitz & Hansen, 2008). Many LGBTQ2+ students withdraw from typical school experiences and relationships as a result of the pervasive heterosexism, traditional gender binary beliefs, homophobia and transphobia they encounter, or out of fear of being discovered if they are yet to come out (Savage & Harley, 2009). Removed from the mainstream cultural group in school, LGBTQ2+ students experience physical and psychological harassment, academic struggles, strained and broken family relationships, loss of support networks, and internalized homophobia and/or heterosexist self-hate, as well as poor self-esteem, homelessness, eating disorders, and suicidal behaviours (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Rottmann, 2006; Savage & Harley, 2009). LGBTQ2+ students have been described as the most underserved population of youth in schools, and these challenges are brought on through the master narratives of the dominant culture and its influence on the institution of education (Savage & Harley, 2009).

### **Transgender Student Experiences**

As the need for safe school environments for LGTBQ2+ youth becomes more understood, attention has begun to focus to the school experiences of the transgender portion of LGTBQ2+ youth. Recent research and literature indicates that transgender youth face even more marginalization than other youth within the LGTBQ2+ community (McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010). According to McGuire et al. (2010), transgender youth find their school environments to be less supportive as many current policies fail to provide protection based on gender identity or expression. Transgender youth are generally more stigmatized than lesbian and gay youth in contemporary society and require more support and services (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). Meyer and Leonardi (2018) report that transgender students are among the

most vulnerable populations in school communities and experience disproportionately higher rates of bullying, harassment, truancy, suspension and dropping out.

Recent research has found that school harassment due to transgender identity is pervasive and closely associated with transgender youth feeling unsafe at school (Case & Meier, 2014; McCormick, Schmidt, & Clifton, 2015; Poteat & Scheer, 2016). Transgender youth experience significantly higher rates of verbal, physical, sexual abuse and assault when compared to other members of the LGBTQ2+ youth community in high school (McGuire et al., 2010). This hostile school environment is associated with significantly higher levels of depression, suicide, academic failure, school drop out, substance abuse, risky sexual behavior. Outcomes such as low college and university enrolment, unemployment, poverty, limited access to health care and homelessness are long-term consequences experienced by transgender youth (Case & Meier, 2014; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; McGuire et al., 2010; Tunac De Pedro, Jackson, Campbell, Gilley & Ciarelli, 2016).

McGuire et al. (2010) stated that gender atypicality is significantly correlated with the level of victimization a youth experiences at school. Consistently increased victimization is reported for youth who present with greater gender non-conformity. Transgender youth do not only face discrimination from outside the LGBTQ2+ community but often from within as well due to the continuum of gender identification and expression represented in the transgender community. Therefore, supports in high school targeted at the LGBTQ2+ community are not always available or accessible to transgender youth (Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011).

Compounding this is the complex intersectionality of membership in multiple minority social identities. Many transgender youth are members of other social, cultural, ethnic, religious backgrounds, each with its own view on gender identity and expression. Membership in multiple

minority communities increases complexity, marginalization and victimization for transgender youth (Poteat & Scheer, 2016).

### **Influences of the Dominant Culture**

Educational leaders acknowledge the notion that historically, schools tend to have valued the views of the dominant culture, ignoring the values of those without power and authority (Hampton, 2010; Savage & Harley, 2009). The dominant culture is the cultural group that is most influential within the economic, social and political environment in which multiple cultures are present (Hampton, 2010). Within a community this dominant group establishes the language, religion, values, rituals, and social customs that often are considered norm for the community as a whole (Savage & Harley, 2009). No decision or action is value neutral (Freire, 1974; Manis, 2012). The suggestion by the dominant culture that value-neutral decisions and actions are possible while the voices of marginalized, vulnerable populations are being excluded, creates an environment that supports oppression and denies equal access and opportunity to all members of the community (Manis, 2012). However, when those creating social policy (who are often members of the dominant culture) and the institutions driven by this policy invite and account for the voices of multiple groups, strong feelings supporting a certain perspective often emerge, and the response is defensive and undemocratic toward the marginalized, vulnerable populations (Savage & Harley, 2009). Such responses lead to mistrust, distrust, and power struggles that do little but maintain the status quo, further disenfranchising the marginalized, vulnerable groups (Apple, 1996; Manis, 2012). According to Apple (1996), this cycle is responsible for the continuity of the hegemony in North American society that allows for the oppressive political and social systems of the dominant culture.



Any serious examination of hegemony and systems of domination within a community makes many people uncomfortable; therefore, these issues are often not met head on (Apple, 1996; Chan & Treacy, 1996). Such discussions, if and when they do occur, are often facilitated by the dominant group. Critics assert that that white, upper middle class, educated, heterosexual, and cisgender males in North American society, having never had to struggle against injustice, are the least equipped to support discussions of authentic voice for all community members and issues of social justice (Foley et al., 2015). In addition, this dominant population has the most to sacrifice in terms of their social positioning. The social conditions of white, upper middle class, educated, heterosexual and cisgender males create their dominance and afford them the opportunities of hegemony (Patton & Bondi, 2015).

Foley et al. (2015) noted that critical thinking about social policy and related institutions is generally tolerated by the dominant group within a community, as long as the marginalized, vulnerable populations do not go beyond speaking about the desired change. However, any serious attempt to understand the system of dominance and hegemony requires that all community members participate in the inquiry (Chan & Treacy, 1996). This approach asks all members to examine what they know and what they need to learn about to examine their histories; their political, legal, and social systems; their education; and the context in which they seek to understand their experiences. As people learn more about the power relationships that exist in their community, the community tends to look different to them, as they take a different place within it and experience a different narrative than previously assumed (Chan & Treacy, 1996). McLaren (1994) acknowledged the responsibility of all community members to offer resistance, as a process of actively contesting hegemony. The act of resistance demonstrates the agency of each individual to not passively accept the ideology or ascribed roles of society, no

matter where they find themselves on the continuum of dominance, marginalization, and vulnerability.

Chizhik and Chizhik (2002) observed that privileged students, primarily white students, were more likely to blame oppression on factors within the oppressed group and to believe that the oppressed should be responsible for helping themselves. They also found that students from marginalized groups, primarily students of colour, attributed privilege to factors external to the individual. Factors of power dominance, hegemony, self-interest, and locus of control all contribute to environments that allow the vulnerability of marginalized populations to continue to exist. The idea of interest convergence is a critical component in moving communities forward from environments that support power dominance and hegemony to environments that respond to the voices of all community members and reflect a social justice, democratic model of inclusion (Beachum, 2013; Blackmore, 2006; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Beachum (2013) argued that currently the white, upper middle class, educated, heterosexual cisgender male who exercises hegemony and dominance within the community will only change the circumstances of the vulnerable, marginalized group when doing so also benefits him. Historically, male whiteness has been constructed as a form of protection under the law (Blackmore, 2006; L. D. Patton & Bondi, 2015). According to L. D. Patton and Bondi (2015), this protection identified four properties of whiteness: (1) the right to disposition; (2) the right of use and enjoyment; (3) reputation and status as property; and (4) the absolute right to exclude others. Initially, therefore, issues of marginalization with regard to both the feminist movement and racial equality were considered only when they converged with the interests of the white male.

Hampton (2010) suggested that significant change in school communities can occur only when issues of social injustice, inequality, and power relationships are critically examined by all

community members. Understanding the compensatory relationship between privilege and oppression is a crucial first step leading to an understanding of one's own responsibility to act in ways that diminish power dominance and hegemony and create opportunities for social justice (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2002). Bernstein (1976) stated that the movement of a community from an environment of power dominance and hegemony to one of social justice and democracy is the result of critical insight through self-reflection into the relationships of power. In order for this process to create authentic change in power structures within the community, Hampton (2010) suggested that power elites must acknowledge their domination over the voices that remain silent. Edwards (2006) pointed out that although this dominant group often recognizes the need for change, in seeking change they tend to direct, take a leadership role, and focus on self, rather than listening and partnering equally with the vulnerable, marginalized members of the community. A critical examination of one's own and others' social position is considered integral to the development of critical consciousness and social change agency (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2002). According to Freire (1970), it is in the struggle to liberate disenfranchised individuals that we can create new and better opportunities for all members of the community. That possibility lies in the power derived from involvement of the once vulnerable, marginalized population. Exploration of the dynamics of privilege and oppression is at the core of critical pedagogy (Chizhik & Chizhik, 2002).

### **Critical Theory**

Critical theory, which has its foundations in the work of the Frankfurt School of Critical Social Theory, challenges traditional theories based in positivist approaches to social research (Foley et al., 2015). Critical theory is "critical" because it examines the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about (Young & Marshall, 2013). The theory aims to

question the value-laden curriculum of everyday life, the power structures that manipulate rationality and truth, and how subjectivity becomes a political ontology (Foley et al., 2015; Foucault, 1990; Giroux, 2007; McLaren, 1994). Freire (1974), in his work with Brazilian peasants, advocating on their behalf for social justice, theorized that becoming aware of one's own sociopolitical reality and position—through reflection and dialogue and attaining critical consciousness—would serve as a catalyst for social justice advocacy. According to Kincheloe (2007), critical theory is an ethical and political practice dedicated to cultivating a critical consciousness among community members, both to the power dynamics that influence their values, attitudes, desires, choices, and subjectivities; and to their own individual and collective power as social agents capable of influencing and changing social and power relationships within their community. Sirotnik (1991) defined critical theory as an ethical stance committed to the empowerment of vulnerable, marginalized populations within a community. Critical theory has a significant focus on social justice, and advocates actions to address the injustices and inequalities suffered by marginalized groups (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). It also examines social, political, and economic phenomena as total entities that influence each other, as opposed to being separate and isolated parts (Giroux, 2007).

Other aims of critical theory are to identify hegemonic structures within a community that are related to social, political, and economic factors; to equip people with agency to resist oppression; and to move them to participate in struggles of emancipation (Young & Marshall, 2013). Critical theory is concerned with action to transform society, is oppositional, and advocates social change for the most vulnerable, marginalized members of a community (Giroux, 2007). According to Usher (1996), critical theory endeavours to critique and transform dominant structures within society by identifying the beliefs and practices that limit freedom,

justice, and democracy. The intention that drives this process is the restitution of the rights and privileges of vulnerable and marginalized groups. Rottmann (2006) simply defined critical theory as any conflict theory that aims to critique social, political, and economic inequities.

Critical theory values the role of dialogue, communication, and criticism; together these are identified by Stokes (2000) as *discourse ethics*, which establishes the principles under which dialogue about social norms can take place. Similarly, Hampton (2010) indicated that critical theory is dedicated to social change through the processes of reflection, dialogue, and analysis. According to Ryan (1998), those committed to social change under a critical theory foundation must move beyond acknowledging inequality within communities and commit to taking action in rectifying the inequalities. Critical approaches focus less on matters of efficiency and positional authority and seek to find ways to improve the life situations of vulnerable, marginalized community members. This is accomplished through the elevation of social critique and advocacy for the advancement of democracy, equity, and social justice.

In addition, critical theory is concerned with ways in which communities can overcome exclusionary situations through emancipatory practice (Linklater, 1992). Sirotnik (1991) suggested that to be critical, one must begin with an understanding of the current situation and the power dynamic that influences it, and then explore the historical events that have led to these circumstances. This is followed by delving into the values, beliefs, and interests being served by the situation. Critical inquiry calls for dialogue and action (Lather, 1988); it acknowledges that our reality is so complex that many sources of truth must be considered when generating an understanding of what is occurring for groups within communities. Manis (2012) supported this point of view and described the process of being critical as practicing deep examination through dialogue with others about the legitimacy of the social order, with regard to access to

socioeconomic resources and opportunities. Freire (1974) referred to this as a process of decoding, whereby sociopolitical realities become transparent and a sense of empowerment as change agents becomes possible. Critical theory practice aims to ask what kind of society and world we wish to live in, and what conditions are necessary to nurture and nourish free, imaginative, and creative human self-realization as an end in itself (Foley et al., 2015).

In the research realm, critical theorists see research as not only adding to existing knowledge, but also as a process for engaging in a dialectical revision of existing understandings, with the aim of subjecting what we think we know to intense scrutiny and re-examination (Stokes, 2000). Using a critical lens in research challenges the acceptance of the status quo by acknowledging the unequal distribution of power and seeks to eliminate the oppressive conditions. This critical perspective incorporates democratic ideals and seeks to understand past practices, so that new practices that emulate social justice and equality within communities can be established (Hampton, 2010). Challenging the status quo requires a commitment from individuals and the community to give permission for the deconstruction of existing social and cultural practices, and to create new practices through a common vision, a common goal, and a common purpose. Community leaders understand that changing the status quo cannot be accomplished until the community accepts responsibility, engages in critique, and believes change is necessary and possible (Quantz, Rogers, & Dantley, 1991).

Freire (1970) defined *critical dialogue* as a horizontal medium of communication, where all individuals are considered equal. A leader's authority is not based on the positional authority of the leader's power to compel or manipulate but is exercised in that leader's ability to discuss and dialogue (Foley et al., 2015). Critical dialogue is in opposition to vertical communication (i.e., top-down interactions), and instead places emphasis on naming issues in a collaborative

manner (Foley et al., 2015). In critical theory practice, reflection without action is meaningless, as is action without reflection (Foley et al., 2015; Hampton, 2010; Lather, 1988; Ryan, 1998). Freire (1970) used the term *praxis* to describe the process of reflection and action in facilitating transformative understanding in emancipation efforts.

Using a critical theory lens requires one to think and act beyond the limits imposed by authoritarian structures and fundamentalist beliefs (Giroux, 2007; Usher, 1996). Critical theorists' work should never be determinant or autocratic; the work should always reflect partial and impassioned perspective, working to expand the boundaries of the permissible and possible while questioning the assumptions, agendas, and presuppositions of all community members, including oneself (Foley et al., 2015). It is clear that critical theorists are politically minded (Carspecken & Apple, 1992; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). However, personal values have an impact for critical theorists, as their professional work cannot be separated from their personal lives or from the experiences of others in the communities in which they live (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). According to Carspecken and Apple (1992), critical theorists share common characteristics in their work: They are value oriented and concerned with social inequalities, and they advocate social change; their concern with social, political, and economic institutions focuses on structures of power, culture, and human agency; and their intention is to change social, political, and economic structures, rather than merely describe the experiences of marginalized, vulnerable populations. Critical theorist practice involves a framework of empowerment, giving voice to subjects who are marginalized and vulnerable in the context of the communities they live in (Thomas, 1995). Thomas (1995) held that critical theorist practice should endeavour not just to describe the context of marginalization and vulnerability, but to change it through social action. Critical theorists place their alliance with the oppressed. Wallace

and Wolf (2005) acknowledged that the burden of proof that oppression exists is no longer on the oppressed, who have historically had to demonstrate their circumstances of marginalization and vulnerability. Instead, the oppressor should be more compelled to demonstrate that no oppression exists. Wallace and Wolf identified this idea as *standpoint epistemology*.

As mentioned earlier, using a critical theory lens requires one to think and act beyond the limits imposed by authoritarian structures and fundamentalist beliefs (Giroux, 2007; Usher, 1996). Giroux (2007) referred to this as the politics of educated hope. *Educated hope*, as defined by Giroux, recognizes that critical practice is always a moral and political activity, as researchers' and professionals' practice must reflect a vision, and their work must support a preferred future for marginalized, vulnerable groups and adjust the norms of an unfair and unjust society. This critical lens must guide both the inquiry and practice of the researcher or professional practitioner to ensure that social justice, equity, and caring are intimately embedded in the generative processes of knowledge creation and community building (Hampton, 2010). Parker and Stovall (2004) recognized critical theory practice as a call for educators to be agents for social change with the students with whom they are associated. They saw that this relationship has the capacity to influence how students experience and interpret the context of the communities in which they exist, and as the citizens of the future who will drive the social, political, and economic structures for that future.

### **Critiques of Critical Theory**

Three central themes emerge in the critiques of critical theory (Kanpol, 2009). The first of these is the presumed right of critical theorists to speak on behalf of the oppressed. When speaking on behalf of a marginalized, vulnerable population, questions can emerge as to the validity and reliability of what is being communicated. Influences of power domination must be



considered; also, speaking for another has the potential to indicate that the marginalized group may not have the capacity to speak for themselves or may not have the audience required for their voice to be heard and considered, and for impact to take place (Siry, 2015).

Critical theorists are also criticized for the strong language they use (Kampol, 2009). Words such as oppression, dominance, power, emancipation, and justice have the potential to offend and create discomfort among groups in society (Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1988; Pitt & Britzman, 2015). Rather than inviting engagement into dialogue, the language of critical theory has the capacity to offend and disengage important groups within a community. The strong language can influence dominant members within a community to characterize those who are critical as being antiestablishment and not interested in understanding the multiple perspectives and contexts that exist within communities. Rottmann (2006) suggested that critical theorists may discredit themselves when they challenge inequitable social, political, and economic structures around one dimension, as many of these issues are multidimensional.

The third criticism of critical theory is the lack of practical tools offered for implementing social change (Kampol, 2009). Critics indicate that critical theory fails to provide concrete suggestions on how to implement its values, mainly focusing on deconstructing, with little reconstruction (Foley et al., 2015). In addition, critical theory is not able to provide step-by-step guidelines, as issues and actions required for societal transformation are unique in different arenas and cannot be prescribed (Kampol, 2009; Parker & Stovall, 2004).

### **Critical Theory: Feminism, Race, and Issues of Sexuality and Gender**

Critical theory's focus on the social, political, and economic structures that perpetuate the power dominance of some, to the detriment and oppression of others, can be seen historically as framing the struggles of particular social groups within North American society. Although there

are many schools of thought from critical theorists' perspectives, I will be looking at Critical Theory from the lens of the Frankfurt School (Foley et al., 2015), Critical Feminists Theory (Young & Marshall, 2013) and Critical Race Theory (Beachum, 2013; Delgado & Stephancic, 2001; L. D. Patton & Bondi, 2015).

Critical feminist theory focuses on the power dynamics within a community in relationship to gender. According to Young and Marshall (2013), feminist critical theory is a multifaceted social movement dedicated to transforming those social, political, and economic arrangements that disadvantage women because of their gender. Significant issues have arisen within the feminist movement, such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity rights, equal pay, women's suffrage, sexual harassment, and sexual violence (Blackmore, 2006). Since the early 20th century, feminism has gone through three significant waves as a popular movement in society. The first wave considered issues of suffrage and political equality and tended to address these issues for middle to upper class white women only. The second wave attempted to further combat social and cultural inequalities among an increasingly diverse membership of women in society. The third wave of feminism continues to challenge the political, financial, and cultural inequalities based solely on one's being female (Young & Marshall, 2013). As the feminist movement gained momentum and included cultural groups other than white women, women of colour in particular saw a messiness of the categories of gender and race, where gains made under the feminist movement continued to leave them vulnerable and marginalized due to their race (Blackmore, 2006).

Critical race theory is a framework that attempts to provide ways to examine, analyze, and explain the role of race and racism in our society (Beachum, 2013). Critical race theory views racism as embedded and permeating everything in societal structures and behaviours

(Beachum, 2013; Delgado & Stephancic, 2001; L. D. Patton & Bondi, 2015), and aims to understand the power structures that perpetuate inequalities based on race (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). It challenges traditional claims made by social, political, and economic institutions in regard to objectivity, meritocracy, colour blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Solorzano and Yosso (2002) regarded these traditional claims as camouflage for self-interest, power, and privilege among dominant groups.

Critical theory, with its focus on issues of social justice, power dominance, language, and culture; asking who benefits from particular policies, practices and arrangements, and how and why; who are marginalized; and whose voices dominate—provides the building blocks of critical feminist theory and critical race theory (Blackmore, 2006). Critical theory provides the framework necessary to tackle these challenges in society, and therefore is inherently anti-sexist and anti-racist (Foley et al., 2015). Since heterosexism, sexism, racism, classism, ableism, and many other oppressive forces continue to structure social, political, and economic institutions, any theoretical lens used to reveal the multiple dimensions of discrimination must connect to critical thought (Kumashiro, 2002).

Recent investigations in regard to the experiences of LGBTQ2+ youth have used a critical lens. These investigations to date have helped conceptualize the dominant issues within the LGBTQ2+ community (particularly in relation to education) and society's shift in perspective over this history. According to Griffin and Ouellett (2003) the first stage of investigation occurred from approximately 1920 to 1979 and focused on homosexual educators as a threat to children. From 1980 to 1989, lesbian and gay youth began to be viewed as a population at risk. In the third stage, 1990–2002, the focus was directed to schools as risk

environments for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. Investigations have since expanded from lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB), to incorporate a much larger marginalized, vulnerable group, that being LGBTQ2+ youth (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003).

### **Schools as Critical Arenas for Social Change**

Schools essentially have been seen as serving two main functions: the production of a labor force, and the reproduction of the forms of consciousness, disposition, and values necessary for the maintenance of the existing social order (Foley et al., 2015). Education as an institution is seen to reflect and recreate the values, beliefs, attitudes, and definitions of knowledge that are esteemed and transmitted by the dominant cultural group within society (Savage & Harley, 2009). Although this influence on schools is seemingly entrenched as an aspect of the political and economic pressures of North American society, today it is a subject of criticism and debate (Noddings, 2005b). Noddings (2005b) framed this debate in terms of three questions: What are the aims of education? How do schools serve a democratic society? and What does it mean to educate the whole child?

Current educational literature reflects the shift in the goals of school in North America, from recreating society's dominant norms to addressing the individual developmental needs of each student by ensuring equity, access, and educational opportunity for all students (Noddings, 2005a, 2005b; Robinson, 2011; Savage & Harley, 2009). Schools not only have a responsibility to see that youth are proficient in reading and mathematics, but must also graduate individuals who exhibit sound character, display a social conscience, think critically, are committed to their endeavours, are aware of community and global issues, and have experiences that enable them to become active citizens in a democratic society (Noddings, 2005b). Education should develop in people the knowledge necessary to be able to reflect upon themselves, their abilities, their

responsibilities, and their personal power to support a healthy life for themselves, their families, and the communities they live in (Freire, 1974).

### **Social Justice Leadership**

Interest in leadership today is focused not only on the effects of leadership, but also on the ethics and morality of leadership (Heck & Hallinger, 2005). The effective educational leader image of many North American scholars portrays a strong, charismatic, dedicated, dynamic, disciplined individual capable of problem solving, guiding schools through rapid system changes, and maintaining order and stability through even-handed applications of justice (Rottmann, 2006). North American society must change this current inclination to place the burden of problem solving on individual leaders who cannot possibly represent the socially diverse group of students, staff, and community members who live, learn, and work in public schools. Defining leadership in the current context becomes problematic, as educational leaders face many complex issues, some of which may be unique to a specific community. Robinson (2006) identified over a hundred definitions of educational leadership in the current educational research literature and posited that educational leadership can be understood as the effecting of policy, values, and philosophy through collective action. It is the moving of individuals and communities toward goals through organization.

Because of the complexity represented in the diversity of North American schools, it is not possible for a leader to satisfy the desires of all community members. Scholars who advocate new approaches to educational leadership, but who do not demonstrate an appreciation of current realities, risk being described as utopian and alienating those they seek to influence (Robinson, 2006). It is the responsibility of all community members to deconstruct their expectations of the single visionary heroic leader and to participate in organization and advocacy work. Doing so

requires the destabilization of our current thinking in regard to educational leadership. If education is to be inclusive of all individuals, it must be able to welcome the participation of all constituents in program planning, policy development, and the articulation of the desired outcomes. This requires a blurring of the current binaries of who is inside and who is outside the organization, and the roles of leader and follower within the organization (Rottmann, 2006). The paradox faced by educational leaders is that they are legally responsible to make public schools safer places for marginalized, victimized students, while at the same time they are constrained by historical social structures that created the context in which the marginalization and victimization developed.

Rottmann (2006) proposed three reasons that this is important work for educational leadership in the current North American context. First, the social and political climate in North America puts minority issues at the forefront daily, particularly through the immediate, global nature of information sharing in the media. Communities are demanding intervention by educational leaders, based on what they understand through the media as well as their own personal experiences. Second, issues of marginality (gender, for example) are one of the most frequently discussed topics in the media but are not currently reflected in the educational curriculum. This offers opportunities for educational leaders, school staff, students, parents, and community members to engage in critical discourse. This critical discourse has the potential to model knowledge creation and community development through collective dialogue. Third, marginalized groups rarely come forward collectively to challenge dominant hegemony.

Throughout history, creating greater social justice in society and in its institutions has required the commitment of dedicated leaders (Larson & Murtadha, 2002, p. 135). Grounded in critical, feminist, and ethical theories, social justice scholars have largely rejected the rational–

technical and efficiency-focused conceptualization of leadership (Marshall & Oliva, 2006).

Social justice leadership scholars explore a concept of leadership based on ethics of care and the moral imperative of improving practice and student outcomes for minority, economically disadvantaged, female, LGBTQ2+, and other students who have not traditionally done well in school (Brooks & Miles, 2006).

Social justice is often seen in inclusive school practice (Ryan, 2006). Social justice can be achieved if people are meaningfully included in institutional practices and processes. Social justice leadership is about changing the system to be inclusive of all individuals, rather than attempting to include them in the system as it currently exists. Educational leaders with a social justice orientation seek to improve educational outcomes for all groups (with a particular focus on historically marginalized groups) through investigating, making issue of, and generating solutions to social inequality and marginalization due to race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other forms of diversity (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

In order to understand, promote, and enact social justice, educational leaders must develop a heightened critical awareness of oppression, exclusion, and marginalization (Brooks & Miles, 2006). Freire (1970) referred to a leader's ability to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to act against oppression, exclusion, and marginalization, as *critical consciousness*. Educational leaders have a lot to consider before, during, and after policies are made for a group of people. They have to understand the past history of a people, understand the present from the multiple perspectives of community members, and anticipate the future implications of the policies that are being developed (Ottoman, 2009). Educational leaders must recognize that policy, organizational practices, and leadership actions are expressions of ideology and moral judgements about the world (Greenfield, 1979).

Educational leaders must recognize unequal circumstances of marginalized groups, and direct actions toward eliminating these inequalities. Social justice leadership is “action oriented,” and involves identifying and undoing oppressive and unjust practices and replacing them with more equitable, culturally appropriate ones (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). There is no fixed, predictable action in social justice leadership. In school communities, social justice leadership practice becomes apparent through the principal’s actual engagement in both advocacy and ongoing experiences related to issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions (Bogotch, 2002). Ryan (2006) maintained that social justice leadership practice comprises a number of distinct practices: advocacy for inclusion, educating participants, developing critical consciousness, nurturing dialogue among community members, emphasizing student learning and classroom practice, adopting inclusive decision- and policy-making strategies, and incorporating school-wide and community-wide approaches. Critical consciousness and dialogue among all community members are seen as necessary elements for leadership in a social justice frame. DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) regarded these elements as critical in an environment that encourages and respects the voice of all community members. Through these practices, shared values emerge in a school community (Ryan, 2006). Whole school efforts to incorporate social justice through inclusive practices must represent all groups, and all groups must benefit equally from these values (Bogotch, 2002).

Schools should continually aspire to educational leadership that supports social justice through inclusion (Osgood, 2005). Educational leaders therefore must focus on developing the attitudes and competencies of leaders who have demonstrated success in leading schools that use a social justice model through inclusive practices. Without strong visionary leadership, schools



are more likely to perpetuate status quo hegemony than to advance liberation (Brooks & Miles, 2006). Educational leaders who have demonstrated success using a social justice model appear to have a pre-existing set of values and beliefs centred in social justice. These educational leaders are action oriented and have a heightened awareness and desire to advocate on issues related to oppression, exclusion, victimization, and marginalization. They demonstrate persistence and commitment, especially in the face of resistance, and are willing to take personal and professional risks in the pursuit of social equality. They are reflective in professional practice. They have superior communication skills, and they direct communication toward developing relationships that are meaningful and long lasting. These educational leaders connect well with others in a collaborative, democratic, shared decision-making model; however, they are willing to be assertive and to take a stand when necessary to challenge dissenters. They recognize that they cannot do the work on their own, and therefore seek out and encourage the participation and leadership of those around them (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

Fullan (2003) referred to the “moral purpose” of education as the basic stimulant for the work being pursued. Educational leaders seem to share a hope that education has the potential to be the underlying equalizing factor that can overcome conditions such as poverty, neglect, family of origin, geography, and socioeconomic status. Educators want to increase student achievement and raise levels of confidence, and to provide opportunities for young people to explore their place in the world and be inspired and challenged by the possibilities that exist. These moral purposes and high ethical ideals must be the foundation from which educational leaders take action. Research shows that when educational leaders are not able to support these moral purposes with actions that result in teachers providing valuable learning experiences for students, this moral purpose fades and gives way to cynicism, frustration, and limited commitment

(Robinson, 2011). School leaders must address the imbalances of power within schools in order to pursue greater agency for all stakeholders.

You can't change what you don't acknowledge. Change requires a commitment to learning, openness to different perspectives, and strategic, deliberate implementation of respectful cross-cultural practices, particularly as they relate to the decision-making process. Educational leaders and policy makers have to be aware of their personal biases toward people of difference, and how these biases positively or negatively influence decision making (Ottoman, 2009). Blackmore (2006) suggested that school leaders and teachers are best situated to lead the effort to reduce inequality. Not only are school leaders uniquely positioned to influence equitable educational practices, but their proactive involvement is imperative (Brooks & Miles, 2006). Awareness of social justice is not sufficient; school leaders must act when they identify inequity.

School leaders must recognize that social justice becomes even more complicated in heterogeneous communities differentiated by class, gender, age, disability, sexuality, ethnicity, and race. Nancy Fraser (cited in Blackmore, 2006) argued that focusing only on difference will encourage social fragmentation based on the categories identified. Such an approach threatens to turn social justice leadership education into what Wear (2003) termed "safari experiences" (p. 553), and follows a charitable model of engagement, or a deficit-based orientation to difference. Social justice leadership training may be problematic in this regard. Lund (2014) posited that the capacity exists for the promotion of a cultural competence model for school leaders, with the expectation that they are able to demonstrate mastery of an infinite body of intercultural knowledge. This approach tends to be unhealthy and does not support social justice practices within an organization, as it tends to define individuals of difference as "others," and cultures as static entities that do not change over time.

A social justice model of leadership in support of the learning experiences of all students entails asking not only what is good for each child, but also what constitutes a good society, in which rights to choose are not privileged over responsibilities to others and the community (Blackmore, 2006). As articulated by the Assembly of First Nations (2009), in reference to the experiences of marginalization and victimization of indigenous populations in Canada, this is no longer about first nations; this is about Canada and our shared future together, and we must keep that reality foremost in our minds when we set our new direction toward a better future. Ottoman (2009) also maintained that progress forward for marginalized, vulnerable populations relies on the unity of all members of the community moving forward by seeking to understand the experiences of all members of a population.

### **Student Voice**

Student voice informs and strengthens social justice leadership and promotes a transformative school culture that reflects inclusion (Fielding, 2001). The current research literature argues that honouring student voice results in more democratic learning spaces that foster an increase in positive student outcomes (Cumings Mansfield, 2014). However, student voice does not mean simply asking students on a survey how their schooling impacts them and tabulating the responses. Cumings Mansfield (2014) suggested that seeking student voice to improve educational practice is supported by literature in student development, motivational theory, self-determination theory, and constructivist learning theory, as all these fields recognize the importance of active student engagement and feedback in the educational process. Prioritizing student voice in educational research and leadership practices is the most authentic means of advocating for social justice and promoting change within a community (Fielding, 2001). Soliciting student voice is a type of conversation that must take place between school staff

and students, resulting in students' voice being considered and evident in the resulting school reform efforts (Cumings Mansfield, 2014).

Critical feminist theory, with its focus on power in the political, social, and organizational lives of individuals and groups, identifies how the power of some is perpetuated to the detriment and oppression of others. Young and Marshall (2013) focused on the way political, social, and organizational systems are developed and reproduced, and identified two key issues within organizations: who gets to decide, and what counts as knowledge. Within a social justice model, the role of leader is to rethink our current practices, and to reframe policy in efforts to eliminate oppressive practice and empower those whose voices have been silenced. Greenfield (1979) expressed concern that in organization practice, a search for universal truths and one-size-fits-all solutions often results in a framework far narrower than the actual problem. When educational leaders acknowledge the multitude of student identities as they develop their own leadership practices, the result is a more caring pedagogy. In turn, "when children feel they belong and find their realities reflected in the curriculum and conversations of schooling, research has demonstrated repeatedly that they are more engaged in learning and that they experience greater school success" (Shields, 2004, p. 122). Leaders need to deconstruct the students' realities and their own leadership practices so as to not reproduce marginalizing conditions.

Leadership, when understood as a democratic process, promotes alternative models of shared leadership (Blackmore, 2006). Leadership is situated in social and collective practice undertaken by different people, informally or formally, and differently in different contexts. Social justice theorists view schools as social institutions that exist to serve the public good. Disrupting traditional dichotomies demands that the lines between leader and follower are blurred. This blurring of leader and follower within an organization should not be confused with

a recommendation to assign equal responsibility for leadership to all people in public schools. It does encourage us to consider that students, teachers, community members, and educational administrators all have the capacity for leadership and a capacity to nurture and support the leadership of others (Rottmann, 2006).

An educational leader interested in promoting social justice within an organization should not engage in action for “duty’s sake only” and out of “the desire for its fruits” (Krishna, cited in Greenfield, 1979, p. 120). Inclusive leadership is concerned first and foremost with inclusion, both in its process and in the ends it strives for (Ryan, 2006). Educational leaders should be aware of the ways societal norms are translated into educational, economic, and political biases. Acknowledging that schools do not exist in a vacuum means recognizing that they can be sites of either reproduction of or resistance to injustices that are found in the greater societal context. Ottoman (2009) referenced the “Three Rs” when looking at practices of inclusion in a social justice model of educational leadership: respect, recognition, and responsibility. Respect requires that partners are recognized as equals at the table when talking about education. Recognition acknowledges that students have the right to receive an education that reflects their culture, language, gender, disability, and world view in a safe and healthy school environment. Educational leadership entails a responsibility to establish policy and actions that support student success and involve all students, and in which students have a significant role.

Educational leaders who are intentional in addressing the educational inequities of marginalized, vulnerable students are described by Singleton and Linton (2006) as demonstrating passion, professional practice, and persistence. Passion is the level of connectedness and energy educators bring to social justice work in their commitment to district, school, and equity transformation. School leaders who are unrelenting in transforming beliefs and practices to

promote learning for all, and who create access for students who have historically been marginalized, not only have the capacity to recognize the injustice but also have cultivated a foundation of self-confidence and self-assurance. Professional practice refers to essential individual and institutional actions taken to effectively educate every student to their full potential. Persistence is the long-term energy commitment to remain focused on equity and closing the achievement gap. Without persistence, schools tend to drift from one school improvement initiative to another.

Kowch (2013) identified four elements of capacity within a shared leadership model: the ability to manage complex tasks, the ability to generate solutions to problems, the ability to rise above self-interest, and the ability to have individuals organize and act as cohesive groups. A key necessary capacity identified throughout the research literature on social justice leadership, and highlighted by Kowch, is the ability to rise above self-interest. Educational leaders should have a desire to positively influence the lives of their students, the students' families, and the community. Educational leadership requires a collaborative effort that cultivates leadership for improved student learning through consensus building among students, school staff, families, and communities. This requires relationships of trust. This relationship building requires principals to first connect to the beliefs and values that influence how they guide their schools. Leaders should reflect an attitude and show behaviours that take action to understand diversity, inclusion, and social justice, addressing the needs of the "least voiced" and "least well off" (Cumings Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015).

## Conceptual Framework

Predominant North American school programming industrial/bureaucratic model

(Morgan, 2006)



Mandate of principal leadership was to protect this model/maintain the status quo



This paradigm requires the marginalization of some to protect the privilege of others



Recognition that privilege within a society is harmful to those marginalized by it



Equal access to education is an equalizing influence within North American society



Education must change to respect and include the diverse continuum of those who participate in the North American education system (a social justice framework)



What is the leadership required in schools under this new understanding?

## Summary

It is important that school leadership is viewed from multiple perspectives in efforts to acknowledge the impact of school leadership practice on all student populations. This study aims to explore how school leadership has impacted the school experiences of transgender students, an identifiable marginalized, vulnerable population in North American high schools. To conduct this study, it was necessary to complete a review of current literature. This literature review supported an understanding of the current context of transgender students in North American High Schools and establishes how they would be considered a marginalized, vulnerable population worthy of investigation. Historical issues of dominance and marginalization related gender, race, sexuality are explored. Given the significant impact of schooling on the lives of students, families and communities the idea of schools as arenas for social change was discussed. School leadership that supports social justice as informed by student voice were themes evident in the reviewed literature. Woven throughout the literature review were my interpretations of how the literature informs this research and how this research might add to the topic of study.

Although the literature provided an understanding as to the significant barriers faced by LGBTQ2+ students in school, it is limited in expressing the diversity of experiences with the LGBTQ2+ community itself. The literature often uses the experiences of lesbian and gay individuals as representative of all those individuals represented within the LGBTQ2+ community. There is far less literature available on the experiences of transgender students when compared to that of the lesbian and gay communities, however this seems to be an emergent area of study. The current literature seems to describe well, with significant quantitative and qualitative data, the marginalization and vulnerability of the LGBTQ2+ community and to a lesser degree the transgender community. However, other than the establishment of GSAs in



school current literature provides limited guidance as to the support required to increase the acceptance and inclusion of these individuals. Rarely in reviewing the literature is there substantial evidence that the voice of transgender students is reflected within what is written. The literature is replete with professional accounts, often described as expert accounts, of the transgender student experience and suggestions supporting this marginalized, vulnerable population with little evidence of the voice of the transgender community.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods and Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

Experiences of marginalization and victimization seem to be a consistent underlying condition for certain individuals and groups within North American schools. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, question, two spirited, plus (LGBTQ2+) community have recently come to the forefront as a group needing considerable attention in regard to issues of inclusion. From a political and social policy production standpoint, there has been a significant response to the advocacy needs of this group. This research uses instrumental case study (Stake, 1995) to gain an understanding of the impacts of principal leadership in public high schools on the lived experiences of transgender students. It is my hope that the learning that occurs and the knowledge created as a result of this research will be useful to principal leaders in schools to support marginalized, victimized individuals and groups, including and beyond the transgender community.

This chapter describes the study's research methodology. The chapter begins with an explanation of the research context, supporting the rationale for the methodological approach used in the study. The methods used for this study are explained in detail, with specific attention to the description and justification of study participant involvement. The chapter explains how the data was collected and analyzed and provides a brief discussion in regard to the data coding process. One section presents the measures taken during this research study in efforts to establish trustworthiness, and another the limitations and delimitations of the study. Finally, the chapter's conclusion explores the ethical considerations for the study.

## **Research Theoretical Perspective**

A thread that runs through my career as an educator is my work with marginalized, vulnerable, complex populations. I believe that research questions are often asked because the story to be told or explored through those questions has significant personal value to the researcher, and the researcher extends that relevance and significance beyond themselves to the communities in which they exist. Many scholars share the notion of research as contributing to society through knowledge creation, the advancement of collective understanding, and providing a framework that supports the next best question to ask (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003; Crotty, 1998; Gershon, 2009; McNiff, 2013; Tobin & Steinberg, 2015). It is not a stretch to suggest that, through the process of researching people in the context of the communities in which they exist, knowledge is created that has influence in the lives of individuals and communities. This process offers opportunities for researchers to discover their own experiences, and the meaning and value these experiences have, from a personal perspective. McNiff (2013) stated that “researchers always need to link their ways of knowing with the capacity to reflect on what they are doing and why they are doing it” (p. 41). Bates (2008) also believed that qualitative research causes changes and development for the researcher as the researcher interprets the research participants’ experiences. Bates placed this relationship within an interpretive–constructivist paradigm, and it is within this interpretive–constructivist theoretical framework that I approach this research.

Individuals are social beings who interact with one another, and through this interaction, the resulting contexts develop the fabric of society (Crotty, 1998). Sustained knowledge advancement is seen as essential for social progress, and the solution to many of society’s problems. In this context, models of knowledge are far more valuable as tools to enable further

growth, as opposed to accepting or conforming to current understandings (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006). Meaning is not discovered but constructed (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). Meaning comes into existence as a result of one's engagement with the realities of the world. This epistemological perspective is based on a constructivist approach and provides a basis for my research study. A central assumption of constructivist research is that reality is socially constructed and derived from the meaning that individuals assign to their own personal experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). This research aims to understand social phenomena within a particular context. Therefore, it is important that I endeavour to understand the multiple realities of that social context. Baxter and Jack (2008) maintained that capturing the narratives of participants in the context of their lived realities enables researchers to better understand participants' actions and the current understandings and knowledge that are present within the community. Therefore, constructivism is based on the idea of a socially constructed reality, where knowledge development is locally constructed and is a process of social interactions as opposed to a final definite product (Bates, 2008).

An aspect of the human experience is that we experience, interpret, and make meaning individually. Therefore, our perceptions, values, and beliefs influence how we experience the world and what it is we come to know. Universal knowledge therefore is not possible, as history and context influence knowing (Willis & Edwards, 2014). It is with this understanding that I would place how I come to do research from the interpretivist theoretical perspective. According to Willis and Edwards (2014), researchers approaching their work from an interpretive perspective favour the broad participation of stakeholders, who have extensive contextualized local experiences and knowledge. Flyvbjerg (2011) pointed out that researchers approaching their inquiry from an interpretivist theoretical perspective believe that local problems have local

solutions, and that both are identified by the individuals within the context of the local community. These local solutions are collaborative in nature, and therefore, problem identification and problem resolution change throughout a process of dialogue, planning, acting, and evaluation. Bates (2008) referred to these stages as necessary iterations of the research process. This interpretivist theoretical perspective supports the social constructivist framework because through the gathering and sharing of individual interpretation of social realities within communities, knowledge is created that informs decisions that construct future social realities.

### **Rationale for Case Study Methodology**

Educational research opens up new domains of human thinking, exploring, being, and doing (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2015). It is important to note that this research pushes us beyond merely understanding the experience of others. Tobin and Steinberg (2015) observed that the value in research often is in the comparison of the human experience, and it is the differences in these experiences that allow for the expansion of knowledge and the use of knowledge to support social action. Collaboration and consensus, which tend to be highly regarded in more traditional research, are not necessarily a product of participatory qualitative research practice (Gershon, 2009). Siry (2015) supported this notion and expressed the necessity of research to elicit the hearing of individual stories and the resulting action that these stories promote. Rather than being an activity that documents the status quo, educational research must endeavour to alter conditions of marginalized individuals or populations (Powietrzynska, 2015).

The researcher's role in qualitative case study research is not that of a privileged possessor of expert knowledge, but that of a catalyst working with local participants to understand and solve local problems. In this relationship, the research participants become as important as the researcher in formulating the problem, discussing potential solutions, and

interpreting findings (Lather, 1986). Stories told by research participants about their lived experiences allow researchers to make sense of the world as constructed by these narratives. It seems easier to remember and make decisions based on meaningful stories than to remember strings of data that are presented out of context and that can be manipulated to suit the perspective of the presenter (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

Critics of qualitative case study research often point to the difficulty of summarizing and generalizing narrative data as a drawback to the usefulness of such research (Flyvbjerg, 2011). However, Yazan (2015) maintained that the multiple perspectives of research participants have significant value for knowledge creation and social change. Learning occurs, and knowledge is created within the rich, complex narrative that is uncovered by the research questions (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yazan, 2015). Similarly, Simons (1996) believed that eliminating differences in narratives reduces the potential information available to inform the research question. Conflicts within our own stories and the stories of others provoke new learning, as participants search for commonalities within experiences or the meaning derived from the differences in experience (Pitt & Britzman, 2015). Most qualitative researchers believe that multiple perspectives not only inform the research questions but must be represented. Yazan (2015) added that qualitative researchers have an ethical obligation to minimize any misrepresentation and misunderstanding, by representing all participant perspectives.

Research is problem driven and not methodology driven, meaning the methods employed must best help explore the research question (Flyvbjerg, 2011). A research design describes a flexible set of guidelines connecting theoretical paradigms to both strategies of inquiry and to methods for collecting empirical data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Stake (1978) drew attention to

the need for research into educational phenomena to gain understanding through portrayal and documentation of the human experience, rather than through analysis.

Case study is an ideal methodology when holistic, in-depth investigation is needed. A case study is an empirical inquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon in depth, in the context of its relationship to the environment (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Yin, 2009). The qualitative case study approach allowed me to explore the actual school experiences of transgender youth in high schools using multiple data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The use of multiple data sources ensures that the issue is explored not through a single lens, but through a variety of lenses, which allow for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood (Flyvbjerg, 2011; Stake, 1978; Yin, 2009).

Simons (2009) defined *case study* as an in-depth exploration, from multiple perspectives, of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program, or system in the context of the everyday lives of community members. Studying the impact of principal leadership on the actual experiences of an identified marginalized, vulnerable population—transgender students in high school—fits Simons’ definition. Merriam (1998) defined case study as the exploration of a phenomenon occurring in a bounded setting. Thus, a specific phenomenon of interest (the impact of principal leadership on a marginalized, vulnerable student group) that has identifiable boundaries around the inquiry (transgender students in high school) allows this research to be considered a case study. According to Baxter and Jack (2008), case study research should be considered for use as a research methodology under any of the following conditions: the focus of the case is to answer how and why questions, the researcher is unable to manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study, the researcher is focusing on contextual conditions because they are considered relevant to the phenomenon under study, or the boundaries between

the phenomenon and context are not clear. As this research study addresses what the actual behaviours of a principal leader are that positively impact a marginalized, vulnerable group, and how this group experiences this leadership within the context of their high school, Baxter and Jack's (2008) criteria support the use of case study.

The intention of this research was to understand the impact of principal leadership on the experiences of a marginalized, vulnerable student population: transgender students in high school. Simons (1996) maintained that the intention of case study is to offer opportunities for researchers to learn from evidence, to expand the scope of inquiry, to reconstruct their own understanding, and to gain knowledge from a local context and apply this learning in creating social change. Flyvbjerg (2011) supported the use of case study in hopes that researchers will learn something, as opposed to proving something. Learning in research, as redefined by Bates (2008), is a process of experiencing and developing a knowledge construction process. As the researcher comes to new understandings, the iterative cycles of qualitative research allow for the incorporation of these new understandings, promoting further research exploration. According to Yazan (2015), as these iterative cycles occur, the research issues become progressively clarified and/or redefined. Case study provides opportunities for researchers to draw attention to the complexities and contextualities of unique, marginalized communities, teasing out the problems of the case (Stake, 1978). Context-dependent knowledge and experience lies at the centre of case study as a research, teaching, and learning method (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

My intention of looking at the lived experiences of transgender students in high schools was to explore a particular phenomenon in depth, and from this understanding develop transferable understandings of the experiences of marginalized student groups (Creswell, 2015). A case study that is used to provide insight into an issue—where the case becomes secondary as



it plays a supportive role, facilitating understandings of a generalized experience, theory, or issue—is known as instrumental case study (Stake, 1995). The case is explored in depth, its context is scrutinized, and routine activities are detailed to support the researcher in understanding the issues and contextualities of the experience being researched, as related to cases external to the particular case being studied (Stake, 1995). Transferability of case studies can be increased through the strategic selection of cases. Flyvbjerg (2011) suggested that the typical or average case may not offer the richest information. Atypical or extreme cases often reveal more information, because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation to be studied.

### **Research Setting and Context**

Research participants attend a large urban high school in southern Alberta. Students attending this high school are within the designated attendance boundaries of the school. The communities within these designated boundaries are considered well established and a majority of the residence are within the middle-income demographic. There is some cultural and ethnic diversity within the community however it would be generally described as a fairly homogenous middle-class white demographic. The school has a GSA group that has been in existence for five years. Although students currently attend this high school, this case study refers to student study participants' previous experiences in school historically. The researchers focus was the students' school experience in relationship to their gender identity and school, particularly school leadership, throughout their school experiences and not just reflective of the current school in which they attend.

## **Research Participants and Data Sources**

Principal leadership aims to support all students' experiences within a school. As shared previously in this dissertation, the LGBTQ2+ community in high schools is subjected to significantly increased marginalization and victimization (Egale Canadian Human Rights Trust, 2011; Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). When further explored, it becomes apparent that there is an increase in isolation and targeting of the transgender population within the LGBTQ2+ community itself. A research focus on transgender students, who are known to be one of the most marginalized and victimized communities in high schools, constitutes the sample used in this study to identify the impacts of principal leadership on the lived experiences of marginalized student populations.

Purposeful sampling by the researcher was used to identify research participants. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that when doing research, the researcher selects a sample from which they can learn most (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2015). The fact that all research participants are students attending a school in the school district where I am employed and where the study is conducted supports that the sample has a significant convenience sampling element as well (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Patton, 2015). All research participants in the sample were students enrolled at the above-mentioned high school. Six students were selected to participate in semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2015). All students in the study identified as members of the transgender community (three transmale, two transfemale and one non-binary) up to and post interview stage of the study. Study participants were asked how they identified and given the option of transmale or transfemale by the researcher for the purposes of this study. Adams et al. (2017) advise that researchers must include questionnaire and survey options that reflect gender outside of the male/female binary.

At the time of the study, however, participants were mistakenly provided with the option of identifying as transmale or transfemale. In future studies I would provide study participants the opportunity to self-identify and use terms of their choosing to fully respect and appreciate the diversity of gender identity and gender expression. According to Marshall et al. (2017) terminology in regard to gender identity and expression is evolving all the time. As a result, it is important that researchers demonstrate that they are open to a process of reflexive, ongoing learning in recognition of the multiplicity and fluidity of the transgender community identities, experiences, culture and politics (Adams et al., 2017). The words transgender and more specifically the terms transmale and transfemale are very broad terms describing individuals whose gender identity and expression does not align with their anatomical sex assigned to them at birth. Underneath these large groups are very diverse sub groups of individuals who self-identify with a variety of terms (Singh et al. 2011). Terms often used by members of the transgender community to self-identify reflect the diversity within the transgender community. The spectrum of terms used may contain but are not limited to: femme queen, butch, trans, drag queen, drag king, girl, boy, gender bender, androgynous, maletofemale, MTF, femaletofemale, and FTM. Sausa (2005) highlights three key points concerning how the transgender community self-identify. Transgender youth self-identify in many different ways and have constructed a language reflective of their individual transgender identity and experiences. The language used to self-identify is influenced by age, culture, socioeconomic status, location or region. The language used by transgender youth is continually evolving making it difficult for others to stay current and understand the meaning of terms used in relationship to how the individual self-identifies. Transgender youth often report that professionals working with them often use language that is far more rigid and non-inclusive of the experiences that extend beyond the

binary of male/female or man/woman (Sausa, 2005). Future research would support having study participants self-identify using their own terms. One study participant upon review of the transcript of their interview requested that they be identified as non-binary for the purposes of study findings. As a result, study participants have self-identified as three transmale, two transfemale and one student identifying as non-binary.

M. Q. Patton (2015) posited that no absolute number is recommended for sample size, that the appropriate number is what is useful for the researcher to support finding out what they want to know, and what is doable given the constraints of the research project. Dornyei (2007) suggested that sample size be based on the research question, the sources available, the amount of data required, and the time available to the researcher to complete the study. Creswell (2015) observed that it is typical for qualitative researchers to study a few individuals or cases overall, as the ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture diminishes as this number increases. As will be shared in the Limitations and Delimitations section of this chapter, the six students that volunteered and were selected as research participants indicated a willingness to participate in the study through the sharing of personal stories and have experienced other school settings in the city that could provide increased insight and learning. Ethical considerations of the dual relationship (Martin & Meezan, 2007) that existed between research participants and the researcher in this study is elaborated upon within the ethical considerations section of this chapter.

Research participant interview sessions were constructed to focus on what the research literature and Bill 10, An Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights To Protect Our Children (referred to as Bill 10 in this chapter; Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014) indicate are predominant stress points in the daily life of transgender students in school: washroom

use/bullying behaviour, coming out/disclosure/parental consent, and student-run organizations. All interview sessions began with a general discussion, allowing research participants to share information that provides context about their unique school histories.

A hallmark of case study research is the ability of the researcher to access multiple data sources (Yin, 2009). Each data source is one piece of the puzzle, contributing to the researcher's understanding of the whole phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Documents reviewed in this case study were Bill 10 (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014); *The Province of Alberta School Act* (Province of Alberta, 2015); *The Guide to Education* (Alberta Education, 2015); and *Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions* (Alberta Education, 2016).

### **Data Collection Methods**

This study is based on case study methodologies that reflect ideas from Merriam (1998), Simons (2009), and Stake (1995), presented earlier in this chapter. The primary method of data collection for this study is semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2015). These interviews, along with an analysis of pertinent documents, constitute the data collection for this study.

Interview is the most utilized data collection method in qualitative research studies (Oka & Shaw, 2000). The usefulness of interviews has long been recognized in qualitative research. As qualitative researchers tend to provide detailed descriptions of individuals and events in their natural settings, interviewing has usually been thought of as a key factor in research design (Creswell, 2015). Interviewing is a valuable method for exploring the construction and negotiation of meanings in natural settings (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2015; Kvale, 1996). According to Dornyei (2007), interviews are a powerful tool for eliciting narrative data that allows researchers to investigate people's views in great depth. Kvale (1996) posited

that not all social events are directly observable, and therefore talking to people is one of the most effective methods for attaining and exploring social constructs. As interviews are interactive, interviewers can press for complete, clear answers and can probe into emerging topics; hence, interviews can broaden the scope and understanding of the investigated phenomenon. Interviews are not just a mechanism for gathering information but a process of reality construction, where both parties contribute and are impacted through the experience. Therefore, interviews are not done to people, but involve two people in a social interaction (Woods, 1986).

A semi-structured interview offers more flexibility than the typical structured interview that poses Yes–No questions. Semi-structured interviews allow for depth to be achieved by providing the interviewer an opportunity to probe and expand the interviewee’s responses (Berg, 2007). The data collected for this study was provided by research participants in one interview session. Research participants were offered the possibility of a follow-up session at the participant’s request. Each interview session took place at the school in a private room with only the researcher and research participant present. Study High School provides tutorial opportunities for students daily, outside of a student’s core academic timetable. Interviews were arranged at this time or another mutually agreed upon time that did not disrupt the students’ achievement and progress in their school program. The context of each interview is shared in Chapter 4.

Interview questions are presented in Appendix D. All interviews were audio recorded to ensure that what was being said was captured accurately. Berg (2007) recommended the use of a basic checklist, which allows for in-depth probing while permitting the interviewer to keep the interview within the parameters of the study. During the interviews, notes were taken by the researcher. These notes supported the researcher in tracking the conversation, identifying main

themes, and ensuring that information was recorded from the interview should mechanical issues interfere with the digital record being collected. Appendix E outlines the protocol used in the interview process.

### **Data Organization and Data Analysis**

Data analysis is not a single event at a specific point within the research process; rather, it occurs throughout the research process and (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). Data analysis begins as data collection starts, and data collection and analysis occur simultaneously, in tandem with one another (Merriam, 1998). With this in mind as I started to collect data, either through document analysis or interviews, I began to organize it into themes and groupings based on the study and research questions identified.

Once all document reviews occurred and interview transcripts completed, I coded the data. Coding the data involved assigning designations to various aspects of data, so they could be easily retrieved in order to identify the information (Merriam, 1998). This assisted in interpreting themes for analysis. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) divided coding into two major stages: first cycle and second cycle coding. In first cycle coding, codes were initially assigned to divide data into a large number of categories. Second cycle coding works with first cycle codes to group the summary data into a smaller number of categories, themes, or constructs (Miles et al., 2014).

Creswell (2015) recommends six steps of data coding. These were used as the framework for coding data for this study. First stage was to get a sense of the whole interview. This involved reading all transcripts and jotting down the major ideas in the page margins. Next, I took one transcript and read the whole document, writing in the page margins the main ideas about what the person is saying. This provided me an opportunity to start gathering ideas and information that correspond to the research question. Using this one example, I began coding all transcripts

by placing brackets around sections of text and assigning words or codes that reflected the meaning/significance of that text. After coding the whole document, I created a list of code words by placing together words related to similar ideas. This process supported me in identifying the major themes in the transcripts and removing redundant codes. Creswell (2015) suggested a manageable code size of between 20 and 30 codes. With this list of codes, I reviewed all transcripts again to see if the codes were appropriate to cover the important themes in the documents. Finally, following Creswell's suggestion, I reduced the number of codes to nine themes, based on what was said most frequently, what can be most learned from, what most informs the research questions, and what is most surprising.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Any research study must adhere to standards set out by the institution supporting or affiliated with the supervision of the researcher, and by any institution that the research will investigate and/or where research participants will be recruited. For this reason, this study is subject to approval through the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary, and the Research and Innovation Department of the Calgary Board of Education. I submitted a letter of introduction (Appendix A), the research participant informed consent document (Appendix B) and the research participant informed consent document (Appendix C) to both institutions for their consideration. These letters were approved by the supervising institutions.

When human participants are involved, ethics must be considered at all stages of the research. In terms of both time and the sensitivity of the questions, interviews can be intrusive into the private lives of participants (Cohen et al., 2007). When using interviews, ethical considerations require that the researcher inform participants as to the purpose of the study,



refrain from deceptive practices, use ethical interview practices, maintain confidentiality, and collaborate with participants (Creswell, 2015).

The appropriateness of conducting student participant interviews during the school day in a regularly scheduled tutorial time block falls under the discretion of the principal, the student's guardian, and the student. Research participant consents clearly outlined the proposed interview schedule. Since information derived from the interviews may be used as data for research, student guardians must provide informed consent, in writing, indicating their permission for their contribution to the discussion to be documented and made available for use. Students must agree to participate as well through direct assent in conversations with the school guidance counsellor. Students over the age of 18, as well as students who are considered independent, have adult status and are able to give consent for themselves. For students who are not considered adults, consent was secured from their legal guardians. As is standard in most research, this consent focused on data collection, data storage, and issues of anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process and in reporting the research. Standards for participant withdrawal and the destruction of data during and upon completion of the research study were also communicated.

Particular to this research, there are significant ethical considerations beyond those shared above. Due to the nature of risk in the LGBTQ2+ community, particularly for transgender youth, it is necessary to consider three specific aspects of this research. As discussed previously in this dissertation, people identifying as LGBTQ2+ are marginalized in North American Society, and members of this community are at risk of experiencing violence, discrimination, and exploitation. As research involving LGBTQ2+ populations always occurs within the context of these risks, there may be a greater potential for exploitation and harm to participants in these studies when compared to similar studies of other populations (Martin & Meezan, 2007).

Currently federal regulations exist for research specific to the LGBTQ2+ population (Martin & Meezan, 2007; Taylor, 2016). Therefore, decisions to support or reject research in regard to LGBTQ2+ communities are subject to the sociopolitical ideologies of the research review panels. In the case of this research study, I was not concerned about the potential discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender expression, as both organizations that reviewed the research proposal have recently made significant policy and professional practice statements that are reflective of inclusion and support of the LGBTQ2+ community.

Researchers conducting their research in the community in which they live and work may encounter ethical dilemmas by virtue of their dual relationship as both researcher and community member (Martin & Meezan, 2007). In the case of this research project, I am the researcher and the principal of a school within the district. This may cause some degree of discomfort on the part of student research participants related to the ability to freely, without obligation or coercion, volunteer and/or withdraw from the study. I believe that my position as a high school principal of a school program that provides programming to the highest number of congregated students identifying as transgender supports an understanding and awareness as to the uniqueness and intricacies regarding the context of the study. Supporting potential student study participants with this knowledge may promote among the student research participants the confidence that their participation was voluntary, their ability to withdraw was respected, and their participation remains confidential and anonymous. It is through this dual role that I believe rich data was uncovered that further developed a greater understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ2+ students in high school. I believe achieving this level of trust and confidence with student research participants would be difficult for an outside researcher to attain. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) asserted, research participants are often more concerned with what kind of

person the researcher is than with the research itself and try to gauge how far the researcher can be trusted. Issues of acting on shared knowledge, reporting risk, coercion, and obligation as aspects of a secondary relationship was always reflected upon and subject to open feedback throughout the research study. Boundaries of where and when research participation starts and ends are critical, and a student research participant's choice to volunteer and/or withdraw from the research study was always communicated and respected without prejudice. All student study participants were made aware by the researcher that his interest in researching the experiences of transgender youth in school resulted from his experiences supporting a significant number of transgender students that were encountering difficulty in high school. The researcher indicated that these anecdotal experiences supported that transgender youth in high school are encountering significant barriers to graduation not reflective of the students' cognitive ability but reflective of how supported and safe these students were feeling in school. Recognizing that the interview portion of the research study would have a significant focus on the impact of identifying as a transgender youth in school had on their school experience it was important that I identified myself as a cisgender heterosexual male. Given this I indicated that it would be important to continually seek clarification from the study participants so that transcripts of the interview would capture the subtleties that the researcher may not be aware of or understand considering they do not identify as transgender or a member of the LGBTQ2+ community.

The research ethics review process is established to serve the interests of research participants and support the integrity of the research community. A standard among most review panels is the establishment of an age of consent for research. Generally, in North America the age of consent for research participation is 18 years. This presents a major challenge for research about the experiences of LGBTQ2+ students in school. As most high school students are under

the age of 18 and the literature indicates that a significant number of LGBTQ2+ students, particularly transgender students, are not “out” to their families, attaining parental consent is difficult. It may seem to individuals who are not members of the LGBTQ2+ community that “coming out” is generally better for one’s mental health (Silverschanz, 2007). However, for the LGBTQ2+ community, the process of disclosure, especially to family, continues to be very difficult. LGBTQ2+ youth report that it is within the family that the most significant rejection can occur, making disclosure risky, as abuse, homelessness, and family isolation are all potential consequences (Egale Canadian Human Rights Trust, 2011).

Thus, ethics review committees face a dilemma. Excluding a marginalized group from research participation might create a greater risk for the marginalized group but asking individual members to put themselves in harm’s way in order to participate can have a similar result (Taylor, 2016). Arguments about competency assessment with regard to mature minors, emancipated minors, inclusive research practice, and reducing risk are all considerations for allowing student self-consent (Martin & Meezan, 2007; Silverschanz, 2007; Taylor, 2016). Taylor (2016) argued that researchers and ethics committees are duty bound to find ways to include marginalized groups in research. To not do so may lead others to consider these processes as barriers that deny young people the opportunity to have their voices heard, rather than a gate through which their participation is enabled and their interests protected (p. 39). Because of the time constraints, and the small number of students who fit the research criteria (as noted above), all research participants were above the age of 18 or “out” with their communities and families, so that informed consent for research participation did not require accommodation of the mature and/or emancipated minor status.

## Issues of Trustworthiness

Making meaning from the data requires processes of consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what research participants have shared and what the researcher has observed and read (Merriam, 1998). In a qualitative research context, it is important for researchers to ensure that their research has embedded a self-corrective element, preventing phenomena from being forced into preconceived interpretive schemes. Qualitative researchers must take a self-critical stance throughout the research process, as following correct methods no longer is believed to produce true results, only correct guesses (Lather, 1986). Research concepts of validity and reliability, as first developed under a positivist tradition of research methodology, are difficult to apply in qualitative research. Qualitative research requires analysis with enough detailed description so that the researcher's conclusions make sense to the reader (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1978).

Qualitative researchers tend not to use words such as *bias*, as qualitative research is interpretive by nature (Creswell, 2015). Research findings are interpreted from the personal and political histories of the researcher. Although the value of case studies in qualitative research is based on claims of trustworthiness and the researchers' efforts to establish this, it must be understood that in attempting to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question, objectivity can never really be captured (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As Merriam (1998, p. 2006) states qualitative research is not concerned as much with whether the research findings will be found again but whether the findings are consistent with the data collected. In this study I used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four constructs; credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability to support trustworthiness and accuracy within a qualitative research study establishing the validity of results.

In Chapter I, when I introduced myself in Research Perspectives section, I adhered to the protocols necessary for case study methodologies to be ethical, professional, and conducted using current research. Achieving credibility in a qualitative research study involves establishing that the results of the study are credible or believable from the perspectives of the participants, researcher and audience of the research. It was important that the research questions linked clearly with the purpose of the study, the conceptual design of the study and the methods of the study. An in-depth description of the context of the study, the purpose of the study and the research candidates selected for the study in carrying out this inquiry was carefully considered and shared. Credibility was established as well through the multiple approaches used to check the accuracy of the data. Participants survey data was verified through using the process of triangulation. Triangulation involves corroborating evidence from different individuals and sources (i.e., documents and interviews). In this research study I examined each data source and found evidence to support themes and interpretations across data points further supporting the credibility of this research inquiry (Creswell, 2015).

Dependability is another means that qualitative researchers use to establish the trust value of the inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1982). As Merriam (1998) states, rather than a demand that others gain the same results, qualitative researchers desire that in consideration of the data collected the results make sense. External auditing helped ensure dependability within this study design. I connected with two principal colleagues to review the data collected, ensuring anonymity of student research participants, and report back on the accuracy of themes identified through coding, and whether the data support the findings (Creswell, 2015). I took great care in all aspects of this study particularly pertaining to the areas of data collection, analysis,

interpretation and formulating recommendations in pursuit of dependability supporting that the findings of the study were consistent with the data collected.

The close relationship between the researcher and the research study is another relevant issue that necessitates the establishment of trustworthiness in qualitative research. The third construct in Lincoln and Guba's (1985) model used in this inquiry was confirmability. Confirmability refers to the steps taken by the researcher to demonstrate the findings emerged from that data collected and not from the bias and predisposition of the researcher. Member checks were used in this study to support confirmability of the study findings. Member checks involved the sharing of transcripts with research participants, providing them opportunity to confirm the accuracy of meaning and to provide an opportunity for research participants to add to what they have constructed (Creswell, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Talmy, 2010). An audit trail (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) was also created throughout this study. Through the use of a reflective journal, field notes, a review of pertinent documents and the transcribed interviews it is possible for participants, the researcher and those external to the research study to be able to trace that data back through the inquiry to its origin.

Transferability is the fourth construct for establishing trustworthiness as shared by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Transferability is not necessarily a main outcome of qualitative research. As Lincoln and Guba (1995) suggest it is not the responsibility of qualitative researchers to provide an index of transferability for their study. It is however the responsibility of the researcher to provide the data base that makes opportunities to transfer findings available based on the judgements of those wishing to apply it outside the context of the study. Transferability was established by thoroughly and accurately reporting this case study as to provide sufficient information needed to replicate the study.

Establishing trustworthiness in this qualitative research study occurred through authenticating myself as the researcher and using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four constructs; credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. The intention of establishing trust is to support the reader in understanding the research and how the research can be incorporated into their own context. According to Baxter and Jack (2008),

it is the researcher's responsibility to convert a complex phenomenon into a format that is readily understood by the reader. The goal of the report is to describe the study in such a comprehensive manner as to enable the reader to feel as if they had been an active participant in the research and can determine whether or not the study findings could be applied to their own situation. (p. 555)

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Baxter and Jack (2008) advised that researchers not only need to consider the research question and the methodology to pursue the question but must also determine the unit of analysis: what the case is and what it is not. Merriam (1998) maintained that the most significant aspect of case study lies in defining the case. Placing these boundaries around the case ("binding" the case) allows the researcher to metaphorically "fence in" what is to be studied. Baxter and Jack (2008) suggested considering time and place, time and activity, and definition and context as elements of limitations within case study.

Limitations are the external conditions that restrict or constrain the study's scope or may affect its outcomes (Creswell, 2015). A major limitation in this research study was time. As the study has to be completed within a year from the data collection phase, there was no opportunity for a longitudinal research study to examine principal leadership impact on the lived experiences of students over time. In addition, the study was limited to understanding transgender students'



perspective of the impact of principal school leadership on their own school experience. Another significant limitation was access to research participants. The number of “out” transgender students in our public schools is minimal. The ability to access these students and have them consent to participation in the research further reduces the potential sample population.

Delimitations of a study are the conditions that are intentionally imposed by the researcher to limit the scope of the study (Creswell, 2015). In determining the area of focus for this research I needed an identifiable marginalized, vulnerable student population. Recently in North America, a significant consciousness is emerging with regard to the social, political, and economic marginalization and vulnerability of the LGBTQ2+ population. The LGBTQ2+ population in and of itself is quite diverse. I chose to look at what statistically is the smallest portion of the LGBTQ2+ community, that being the transgender subgroup, which also has significant diversity within it. To further narrow the focus, I looked at the experiences of transgender high school students in one urban high school. I wanted a sample group that had significant school experience and were able to articulate what this experience was like for them. I determined that high school students were most able to fulfill both of these considerations. The high school selected was chosen because that school had an established GSA. As well, this school draws students from all over the city, providing an opportunity for me to explore participants’ school experiences from many contexts and, potentially, their experiences in other high schools.

### **The Case Study**

Personal, academic and professional experiences as presented in chapter one have guided my career path and ultimately have led to my involvement in this study. Yin (2009) speaks about the necessity of case study research as an empirical inquiry that investigates contemporary

phenomenon within the context of real-life”. Bloomberg & Volpe (2012) have stated the importance of real-life context in qualitative research and the importance of knowledge, awareness and understanding of research participants’ settings as a prerequisite before data are analyzed for patterns, themes and issues. With the focus of this study being how the actions and inactions of school principals positively impact the experiences of marginalized, vulnerable students in schools, particularly the experiences of transgender students, it is my intention to gain insight into the leadership behaviours of the school principal and the impacts these behaviours have on transgender students.

Little did I know at the time, but my experiences as a student in school with complex social and behavioral issues would have a significant impact on my professional life. My experiences validated for me that complexity, uniqueness and individual need were conditions to be mitigated and influenced in a manner that moved me forward toward the expectations and standards of the mainstream, and that these expectations and standards were constructed with no ability or capacity on my part to have any influence.

Over my 20+ years as an educator I have had many experiences that have inspired me to explore and support student voice in education. My career has afforded me opportunities to work with numerous complex student populations. I have experiences in hospital programs, secure facilities, special education programs and community school programs spanning all socio-economic demographics. In supporting these students, families and communities I saw the barriers that often marginalized these groups and maintained their vulnerability. Often social policy that is developed to support these groups is developed by “experts” from outside these groups and gives little voice to the groups for which the policy was developed.

Currently I am the principal of a high school that is designed to support high school students that do not see themselves graduating from a large comprehensive urban high school. These students generally are academically capable but are not succeeding in their academic program. Students attending this high school program often have mental health issues, issues with addiction, families of origin complexities and many identify as members of the LGBTQ2+ community. This large concentrated population of students identifying as members of the LGBTQ2+ community has offered me a unique opportunity to understand the experiences that LGBTQ2+ students have in school and reconcile these experiences with current North American policy development (GSA and Inclusive Educational Policy) specifically targeted to support the LGBTQ2+ population. My experience as principal in this unique environment once again supported that policies developed to support a marginalized, vulnerable population offers little voice to that targeted group. I have been a school principal for 14 years, and have come to realize that a significant role of principal is to inform those who create educational policy, interpret that policy and ultimately implement and enact that policy within their schools. This process is critical to how students, school communities and families will ultimately experience the impact of this policy. Therefore, school principals play a significant role in how students will experience school. As Robinson (2011) indicates, school leaders work in a system that expects schools to enable all students to succeed. Further to this, recent research on educational leadership has shown that the quality of leadership makes a substantial difference to the achievement of students (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). My personal and professional experiences have caused me to explore how marginalized, vulnerable student populations, specifically the LGBTQ2+ community, experience school leadership and to offer an opportunity for the LGBTQ2+ student community to contribute their voice through this study.

## **Summary**

This chapter described the research methodology of the study, followed by a discussion of the research context, including rationales for the research approach and research sample. The data collection methods were also described, and the data analysis was justified with an explanation of data coding. The chapter explored how trustworthiness was established, and then the limitations and delimitations of the study presented.

The strengths of the research design and methodology have the potential to further support and increase the knowledge and awareness of the experiences of transgender youth in secondary schools. The trusting, respectful relationship established between the principal and students within their school setting had the capacity to allow for a stronger relationship to be established more quickly offering research participants the safety to share significant personal details in regard to their school experiences. This degree of insight may not have been possible through other researcher participant relationships where limited knowledge about students' daily school context was understood. As the research participant interviews occurred at the school, within the school day, this may have reduced the clinical feeling and the potential resulting stress of the research participants. Conducting the interviews in this manner may have supported students to be more relaxed and therefore more able to recollect and share school experiences that they have had. The power of the students having voice to tell their own story is crucial to this research design and methodology. A basis of this research is that not all groups within a community have equal opportunity to be heard, understood and impact change, this research major strength is that it offers a valuable first step in providing the opportunity for transgender youth to speak as their story is the research data.

The fact that research participants are from one school is a limit of the research design and methodology. Although the school attracts students from other high schools and most students attending the school have one or more other experiences as students in other high schools, the sample may not truly reflect the diversity within the transgender secondary student experience. The limited sample size of research participants again may not reflect the diversity within the community being considered. Although the relationship between researcher and research participant may support trust and respect, it may also lead to a familiarity that allows the researcher to make assumptions, “I know what they mean” or the research participant not to be clear, “I know he knows what I am talking about”. This along with the use of semi-structured interviews offered opportunity to hear some very unique and personal stories but offered little in understanding or generalizing the findings to the larger transgender student community.

Through the exploration of the lived experiences of transgender students, this research study endeavoured to see how school principal leadership impacts the lives of a complex, marginalized, vulnerable population. The use of instrumental case study helps facilitate learning from this research to be applied to experiences of other marginalized populations. Findings from this research study support school principal leaders in accessing student voice, developing training opportunities and implementing policy to support a school model most inclusive of all members of an educational community.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Research Results**

#### **Introduction**

This research study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of which actions and inactions by school principals positively impact the experiences of marginalized, vulnerable students in school. More specifically, the research examined the experiences of transgender students in an urban high school as the window into the relationships between the practice of school leadership and its impact on a targeted, marginalized, vulnerable group in public schools, the transgender school community. To gain this understanding I interviewed six students identifying as transgender from a large urban high school. Of the six students, given the limited choices of transmale, transfemale and non-binary by the researcher on the data collection form, three students identified as transmale, two students identified as transfemale and one student identified as non-binary. The overall goal of this research project was for me to better understand the in-school experiences of transgender students so that school principals will be better able to support the transgender student community, have access to better principal leadership training in support of the transgender community, support the development and implementation of policy reflective of the transgender student community for which it was developed and potentially offer some opportunity to support other targeted, marginalized vulnerable student groups.

To achieve the objectives of this study I focused on three main questions; the first two are considered sub-questions of the final, primary question.

1. How do transgender youth experience various principal leadership practices?

2. How can the implementation of policy by a school principal be best facilitated so that the targeted group experiences the intended benefits for which the policy was created?
3. What are the principal leadership practices that positively impact transgender youth in school?

The research results are organized through themes that emerged related to each of the research questions. The two sub-questions are presented first, followed by the primary research question. The participant responses to the sub-questions support a deeper understanding and provide increased context in understanding and answering the primary research question. This chapter is divided into four sections:

1. A brief profile of the study participants.
2. An overview of the case.
3. The research findings organized according to the research questions.
4. The chapter summary, which incorporates the study conceptual framework as a means to organize and understand the research findings.

## **Participant Profiles**

**William.** William is a grade 11 student and is on the path to graduate in the next school year.

William uses he, his, him as pronouns to describe himself. William plans to be graduating on schedule, requiring no extra semesters in school. William came out to his family and friends in grade 9. William attended a different high school before entering his current high school. He is not currently a member of the school's GSA but did minimally participate in his past high school. The interview was conducted in a private work room in the school's library. William was prompted to be a participant in the study through a friendship he had with another study

participant. The interview took place during a spare class in William's schedule. William did not appear anxious and was casual in nature while the interview was conducted.

**Xander.** Xander is a grade 12 student and is planning to graduate at the end of the current school year. Xander uses he, his, him as pronouns to describe himself. Xander attended two other high schools before arriving at his current high school and has required a fourth year of high school in order to graduate. Xander came out to his family and friends in grade 10. Xander has minimal involvement in the school's GSA. He supports events through the GSA but is not a daily participant in the activities of the school's GSA. Xander's interview took place in the morning before the school's homeroom check in time in the homeroom classroom. Xander seemed enthusiastic and eager throughout the interview.

**Jacob.** Jacob is a grade 11 student and is on the path to graduate in the next school year. This will have Jacob graduating on schedule, requiring no extra semesters in school. Jacob uses, he, his, him as pronouns to describe himself. Jacob came out to his family and friends in grade 9. Jacob attended a different high school before entering his current high school. Jacob supports events through the GSA but is not a daily participant in the activities of the school's GSA. The interview was conducted in a private work room in the school's library. The interview took place during a spare class in Jacob's class schedule. Jacob appeared very relaxed and comfortable during the interview. Jacob was serious in nature during the interview.

**Max.** Max is a grade 12 student and is planning to graduate at the end of the current school year. Max uses, she, her, hers as pronouns to describe herself. Max attended one other high school before arriving at her current high school and has required a fourth year of high school in order to graduate. Max came out to her family and friends in grade 10. Max supports events through the GSA and is an active participant in the activities of the school's GSA. The interview was



conducted in a private work room in the school's library. The interview took place during a spare class in Max's class schedule. Max appeared comfortable during the interview. Max indicated that she was an advocate of LGBTQ2+ issues and was pleased that this research was being conducted and she was able to participate.

**Luna.** Luna is a grade 12 student and is planning to graduate at the end of the school year. Luna uses she, her, hers as pronouns to describe herself. Luna attended three other high schools before arriving at her current high school and has required a fourth year of high school in order to graduate. Luna came out to her family and friends in grade 10. Luna is an active participant in the daily activities of the school's GSA; however, she does not participate in school wide or community LGBTQ2+ events. The interview took place after school dismissal in a private work room in the school's library. Luna is very expressive and brought a lot of energy and enthusiasm to the interview.

**Vincent.** Vincent uses the pronouns they, them to describe themselves. Vincent is a grade 12 student and is planning to graduate at the end of the school year. Vincent attended one other high school before arriving at the current high school and has required a fourth year of high school in order to graduate. Vincent is not currently a member of the school's GSA. Vincent was prompted to be a participant in the study through a friendship they had with another study participant. The interview took place during a spare class in a meeting room in the school's library. Vincent although appearing relaxed in the interview seemed quite guarded in offering specific details about their personal experiences.

### **Presentation of Findings**

I have presented the findings from this study as emerging themes that evolved from the study participants' responses. These findings are presented in a clear narrative form. I have relied

heavily on exact quotes from the student interview study transcripts so that the voice of the student is evident and that the reader may understand more fully the experiences of the students. Connections are made under each finding that allows the researcher to synthesize these voices providing a comprehensive understanding of the themes that emerged from the six research participants. The emphasis within the presentation of findings is to have the participants' voices "speak for themselves".

**Research Question 1. How do transgender youth experience various leadership practices?**

Through the process of coding the data for study participant interviews, I discovered four findings that related to this question. This question was asked to gain an understanding of what transgender students currently experience in their school. The interview questions that informed this question were:

- Tell me about your experience in "coming out" at school. How was this experience impacted by school administration?
- What was your most memorable school experience? Why was this significant?
- In your experience what are the common misperceptions about transgender students in high school? What was your experience with these misperceptions?
- What do you think school administration could do to reduce misconceptions that exist for transgender students?

These questions were designed so that I was not judging or evaluating the experiences. This provided some unintentional, but useful information; with regard to the question of your most memorable school experience, participants always looked for clarification on whether I was

looking for their most positive or most negative experience. I responded that I wanted to hear their most memorable experience; they would need to decide what that was. All six students described a negative event as being most memorable.

Four findings emerged from this question: a significant general level of bullying and harassment for transgender students, school administration reluctance to intervene on transgender issues, washroom access, and all issues for these students are related to being transgender.

***Finding 1.1. Significant level of bullying and harassment for transgender students.***

The bullying and harassment of the transgender population in schools is a well-established circumstance as indicated in the literature review. For many transgender students this victimization through bullying and harassment continues to exist. Vincent indicated:

I think a lot of people think trans youth are trying to be something they are not. I remember a term I heard way back in elementary school, they would say like they are a he/she and it had a very negative meaning. I think unless a student knows someone that is transgender, or it also depends on what the environment was like that they grew up in whether it is you would accept someone that is transgender. I don't think in many high schools that a trans student would not be made fun of or would not be bullied every day.

Vincent did not respond with a great deal of emotion but was more matter of fact about what they had experienced and witnessed in school. Vincent was the study participant to most recently "come out" and seemed to still experience a lot of gender dysphoria. All other study participants had a great deal more experience of "being out" in school.

Luna shared an experience that occurred at school the day after she had shared with a friend that she was transfemale.

I had come out the day before to my best friend. It seems that he went behind my back and told other people. The next day in the cafeteria this other guy yells out, “I am not gonna call you a f\*\*\*ing woman.” Luckily very few people were in the cafeteria at the time as I really didn’t want to come out at school because of how people got treated generally. It is a very small community so there is a lot of people that will pick on you no matter what they are able to focus on. It could be anything. At the time a friend of mine was being picked on all the time. Having his bike seat stolen, having his change of clothes in PE put in the toilets, his lunch thrown in the trash. There was always food being thrown and rubbed in kids’ faces in the cafeteria and things like that. So after this I was bullied all the time. I was called “gay”. I stated wearing a sport bra and had that pulled and snapped. I was pushed in the hallways and groups of boys would whistle and say gross things to me. Mostly it was to beat me up or sexually assault me.

William shared the same idea about the pervasive nature of bullying and harassment in school and how this impacted his feelings of safety at school.

I attended a high school that was actually kinda known as the bully school. It really wasn’t that great. I am pretty small and have an ok sense of humour so I was able to lay low and pretty much avoid things. I never really looked feminine so for me people were like more ok with the whole thing. Looking back though I must have been pretty scared as I started missing a lot of school and wasn’t doing well. I changed schools because I just needed a fresh start, a place where I was William and not (the original feminine name).

Jacob, Max and Xander spoke of similar circumstances in their school experiences. They talked about the name calling, being physically pushed and punched, having their lunches, books

and possessions tossed and thrown in classrooms and hallways. They spoke of the isolation from the school peer group as well as school staff. The common theme in the stories was that they found themselves being tormented daily with limited support from peers or school staff, including school administration. Jacob shares just how traumatic experiences for transgender students can be.

My most memorable school experience is when I was leaving school one day. I was walking home and had just turned the corner from my school and I got sucker punched by a school bully. As I identified as transmale I was physically groped and continually taunted, “if you are a guy why do you have these,” as the bully grabbed my breasts and private groin area. He continued to punch me in the face and broke my front tooth. When the attack was over I went into the school office, bleeding everywhere and was like, “I got punched”. I had to ask numerous times for help. The school secretary gave me a few damp paper towels but was like this is your problem. It’s your fault your being bullied you need to stand up for yourself. I was in shock. All I could think was like look at my face, I am physically bleeding right now and my tooth is broken I need a little more than it’s my fault that I am getting bullied. It is unfortunate that this is my most memorable school experience. I remember it most not because of the assault, but because it seems outrageous to me that school administration didn’t do anything. Regardless if I had a broken tooth or I was trans, but I was a child of someone’s. That didn’t matter.

***Finding 1.2. School administration reluctance to intervene on transgender issues.***

It is clear through the literature review and in speaking to the transgender students that participated in this study, victimization through bullying and harassment continue to be a

significant problem for the transgender population in school. Critical to this inquiry is the response of school staff, particularly the school administration or school principal.

Jacob's description of being assaulted and the response of school administration that somehow he was asking for it, bringing it on himself, or causing a disturbance in school that was unnecessary, seems to be a common theme for all study participants. The study participants describe school principal responses along a continuum of the principal being transphobic and suggesting that the transgender student deserved the bullying and harassment of other students, to where the bullying and harassment seemed uncomfortable for the school administrator to deal with and he or she therefore avoided intervening in a manner that held the perpetrators' of the bullying and harassment accountable and that protected the safety of the transgender student.

Max shared:

At my previous school I just felt neglected. My coming out seemed to have to fit with the schedule of the school. I came out half way through the first semester and that didn't work for the people doing the paperwork. So they just told me do it next year it will be easier for us.

All study participants spoke about the complacency of school administration and school staff regarding bullying and harassment. Transgender students spoke about the impact of this being two-fold: 1) the perpetrators of the harassment and bullying did not receive any feedback regarding the inappropriateness of their abusive behaviour and therefore it was allowed to continue, and 2) all victimized transgender students were aware of how unsafe their school environment was and were therefore reluctant to come out. They spoke about their victimization as an environmental condition of the school that they were unable to change.

Vincent indicated that in their experience, school staff, teachers and school administration would just ignore it (bullying and harassment).

They didn't seem to care. When your experience at school is that people are picked on regardless, constantly being called gay as an insult and nothing is done, you learn to stay private and ignore as best as you can.

Xander's experience was similar to the other research participants and made school difficult for Xander at the time.

They (teachers/school administration/principal) just kind of didn't help me out. They enabled other people to be kind of transphobic and homophobic, and allowed to make those comments during class time. I would get in trouble as it was indicated that I was bringing that kind of topic up in class. But I didn't bring it up. They would just start saying things to me and I would get in trouble because I decided to come out and they just made no effort to understand. I was the same person just kind of pushed aside and no one really cared.

Xander spoke further about his experience within the LGTBQ2+ community at the school.

I never really got the experience of them (LGTBQ2+/trans community) treating me as a trans individual. They just kept ignoring my sexuality and gender identity so I never got that experience. I continued to try to connect with the trans and LGTBQ2+ community in the school but had students come up to me and say that I wasn't trans enough, that I don't have gender dysphoria or that I am not trans male and that I am only mistaken. I remember talking to my homeroom teacher and the school principal and they were like I just don't see you this way (being a trans male). I could never come off as extremely

masculine. Personally, that really bothered me. As a result, I did not have a lot of self-confidence and started to question whether I was making the right decision because of what staff and students who identified as LGBTQ2+ were saying. Maybe I was not appearing the way I was supposed to and maybe something was wrong with me.

Study participants spoke about the school principal's lack of effort to use proper preferred pronouns. In the transgender community the use of proper pronouns to refer to an individual is important because it recognizes in dialogue the acknowledgement of the gender of the person.

Max indicated that misgendering was common in her school experience.

At my old school I had to constantly be coming out because they just didn't pass the message onto all the teachers or staff so I would be constantly misgendered and misnamed. It was just a mess because no one communicated it and then when I attempted to say something the staff and principal just didn't take it seriously. They never had an actual sit down with me to talk about what I wanted. They just did what they thought was easiest.

Jacob spoke about his experience being misgendered.

I continually had to sign all my documents with my dead name instead of my chosen name because it made the work of the school easier, because they didn't want to change the original name on my school file to my chosen name.

Study participants shared anecdotes about how the school principal's inability to establish expectations and behaviors that supported all students, in particular the members of the trans community, resulted in students not participating in school activities and eventually impacting their overall school attendance.



Luna shared how her pattern of non-attendance started.

I started not to do well in class. I was really depressed. I started first to skip class and would sit in the school cafeteria. This happened for almost a month before someone reported it to school administration. I know my teachers saw me there on many occasions but did nothing about it. The school principal met with me and called my mother. Nothing really happened so I started just to miss school all together. It wasn't long before I wasn't going to school at all. I failed all my classes that semester.

William spoke about how he stopped participating in band as the result of a decision that was made by the band teacher and supported by the school principal.

I was in band. I did ok and enjoyed it. We had our winter band concert. I asked if I could wear what the male band members wore. Those being a tuxedo style suit and not the blouse and skirt like the female band members were expected to wear. The school principal told me that they are going to have a lot of people from the community coming in to see the performance and it would really be a lot of work for us so we would prefer it if you just stuck with the female uniform until next year and we'll get you sorted then. It was obvious that this sort of thing was not being taken seriously and that I was not understood. I quit band that semester.

### ***Finding 1.3. Washroom access.***

Study participants shared through the stories of their school experiences some of the most common and significant concerns in school and the response of the school principal in supporting the safety, health and success of trans students. Through the interviews it became obvious that school leadership, particularly at the principal level, needs to be aware of the issue of washroom use in the school. Study participants indicated that for all the issues of bullying,

harassment, abuse, safety and acknowledgment of gender identity, the use of school washrooms is front and center.

Jacob's experience articulates well the issues that arise for transgender students regarding washroom use.

At the school I was going to when I came out I could not do things like go to the washroom I identified with because I felt unsafe there. By not going to the washroom I identified with encouraged people to continue to call me my old name and misgender me because they saw I still used the female washroom. This was because I didn't feel safe. A lot of the school staff started to judge me and would question my gender and make comments about me faking my gender identity.

Luna spoke about a school that took a different approach. Luna shared her experience.

The washrooms are another issue. There are lots of trans kids that are not comfortable going to gendered washrooms. What the school did in my case was allow me to use the nurse's room in the counselling office area. This school was pretty big so there was lots of counsellors I had to walk past to go to the washroom. First of all that was pretty anxiety-producing to walk by all the counsellors. Secondly, I had to walk across the school past many gendered washrooms so there was always the possibility of outing myself. So I never did use the washroom at school. I either went to the strip mall across the street and missed class or went home.

The topic of school washroom use brings to the forefront the complexity of issues that face the transgender student population in schools and the limited awareness and understanding by school principals of the decisions that are made and the impact of those decisions. Max sums

this up when speaking about misconceptions that she feels principals have in regard to the transgender population in school.

A misconception that principals have is around trans students and the use of washrooms. I don't know why but there are people that believe people will pretend to be trans to do things in the bathroom. It is really not like that, we just want to go to the bathroom and be safe. Also giving people safety that if something did happen in a bathroom or change room they could talk to school staff or school administration because at my school they really don't want to talk about the possibility of harm happening to you in the bathroom and change room. They don't seem to take the risk seriously. They just say use the washroom you want, but they never took into consideration that for trans students there is a fear factor, especially when it comes to cis men, if they can be rude and aggressive in the hallways it's terrifying to think what they could do to you in a bathroom or change room where it's private and isolated. So I think school administration does not really think about how they support the trans community with their fear in school. They say things like; you're over reacting, you are being dramatic. They don't know the reality of the emotions you feel.

***Finding 1.4. All issues are related to being transgender.***

The growth of a young person in high school is significant. High school is generally a time where youth move to a more independent young adult phase of life. This developmental stage comes with many challenges for youth, including general issues associated with school, family, health, peer group etc. For transgender youth these challenges are the same, but these students have added challenges related to identifying as transgender. Transgender students expressed frustration and concern that when they seek help or support for the issues that they

experience in their lives, those that are in positions to support tend to focus only on the issues related to being a member of the transgender community. Study participants stated that this was often the case in school.

Study participants agreed that high school can be tough, with studies, peer issues, family, work, etc. They shared that they often feel others see them far differently than they see themselves. Luna expressed this in the following statement.

Many students feel that trans students are really, really different. The only difference for me and how I behave in school is more about how people treat me because I am trans.

They think it's different or wrong so then I am constantly on guard about going to school. School is hard already this makes it worse.

Study participants indicated that there seems to be a perception that transgender individuals just wake up one day and decide to be a different gender. Jacob shared, "One thing I come across is that others think it is just a thought one day. Like one day I just decided to be a boy. Max expanded on this thought.

I think it is just changing people's mindsets. Just because an individual is trans doesn't make them different from every other student. They still have the same problems and issues as any other student. Like you could have conversations that do not always focus on being trans.

The focus on being transgender is problematic when transgender students are dealing with issues of limited school success, mental health, school discipline, etc. Student study participants stated that too often school administrators assumed the issues were related to the student being transgender and nothing else existed for the young person. William shared his

perspective on this issue, “It is like all things get put down to being trans as opposed to maybe some issues being related to family or generally being an adolescent.”

Max shares an interaction she recalls with a former principal.

One thing I have had to deal with throughout school is my mental health. I was always depressed. When I came out as trans at school I was referred to guidance and school administration. In that meeting the school principal was like you are depressed because you are trans. So a person with a mental health condition she (the principal) did not take seriously, she just scapegoated everything on being transgender. I get that being transgender there might be some depression for people but there might be other aspects that are adding to the depression. Sometimes when you ask for help from teachers or school administration they say that it is just because you are trans, don’t worry about it you’ll get over it at some point. So their helpfulness is limited because they just see you in this square and all your problems are because you are trans. It is frustrating because you generally want help, but when they give you suggestions it is just like well in a few years you will be able to transition. They don’t pay any attention to the other aspects, social aspects, school community, family and academics.

The issue that Max put forth, that being a transgender student and being placed in the transgender square and viewed only from this perspective, was a theme that emerged from the interviews. Students spoke of the frustration and helplessness that resulted. This perspective seemed very pervasive for all study participants. It appeared so pervasive within study participants’ stories that when students were able to escape this, the experience of just being a student became remarkable. William speaks about a teacher in grade 8.

My grade 8 teacher was so different from any other teacher I had ever had. She treated me like I was like any other kid. She actually believed I could do stuff and she was really fun. She let me be me I guess.

Vincent spoke about their enjoyment of the off- site experiences in the physical education program.

I liked the field trips in general. Snowboarding is something I just really enjoy. I was having a good time. It also took attention away from me being part of the trans community, we were just boarding, and it was fun.

**Research Question 2. How can the implementation of policy by a school principal be best facilitated so that the targeted group experiences the intended benefits for which the policy was created?**

Through the process of coding the data for study participant interviews I discovered few findings in relationship to this question. Study participants had very little knowledge regarding policy that was created, implemented and enacted by school principals. This question was asked to gain an understanding of the involvement of trans students in policy development, interpretation, implementation and enactment targeted specifically to making a difference for the LGBTQ2+ community, particularly the trans community as part of this larger community, in schools. The interview questions that were asked were:

- Are you aware of Bill 10, An Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014); and the associated Guidelines for Best Practice: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions (Alberta Education, 2016).?
- How have these documents impacted your school experience?

There is one finding for this research question.

***Finding 2.1. Transgender students in this study had very little awareness and limited voice in the development, interpretation, implementation and enactment of policy specifically targeted to support them and their school experience.***

Study participants had limited awareness that policy existed to support the needs of the transgender community in school. Three of the six study participants indicated that they were not aware of the specific policy documents developed by government and interpreted, implemented and enacted by school boards and school principals. The level of awareness from the other study participants was very minimal. Xander answered the question by asking a question. “Isn’t Bill 10 about GSAs? I remember the GSA bill coming out but I don’t really know anything about it.” Max responded in a similar manner, “Is that the one where teachers have to tell parents that their kids are in the GSA? Luna’s response summed up findings for this research question. “I didn’t know these (policy documents) existed until now so they could not have had a noticeable impact.”

It is clear that the participants in this study had no or minimal awareness of the policy designed to support them. This finding fits with many of my experiences regarding the efforts of government, social agencies and communities put forth on behalf of marginalized, vulnerable populations (as shared in the Case Study section of this chapter). In the case of Bill 10, An Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014), the government indicated that this legislation was informed by experts and included the voices of the targeted population. Officials involved in the development of this legislation sought out the participation, voices and insights of many transgender youth. It is apparent that the transgender students in this study had a limited awareness of the significant efforts made through

policy developers to access and incorporate the voices of the transgender student population. At the school level, where this legislation is interpreted, implemented and enacted it appears that opportunities for transgender student voice for the study population was limited.

**Research Question 3. What are the principal leadership practices that positively impact transgender youth in school?**

Through the process of coding the data for the study participant interviews I discovered four findings that related to this question. This question was asked to gain an understanding of the experiences transgender students had in school, and the principal leadership practices that would have a positive impact on their school experience and overall success in school. The interview questions that informed this question were:

- Tell me about your experience in “coming out” at school. How was this experience impacted by school administration?
- What was your most memorable school experience? Why was this significant?
- Are there appropriate examples in today’s culture that school administration can reference and examine as examples of practices that are thoughtful, respectful and inclusive of the high school transgender community?
- As a high school student that has identified as a member of the transgender community what would you suggest as required changes that high school administration must consider to create a safe, supportive, healthy, rigorous and inclusive school environment?

There are four findings for this question: building community, education and support for transgender students knowing themselves, education and support for others to know transgender



students, and opportunities for role modeling transgender participation in the context of the transgender communities.

***Finding 3.1. Building community.***

Study participants are somewhat pioneers in their experiences as transgender students in school. It is only recently that transgender youth have come out in significant enough numbers that the issues they encounter in doing so became a social and political discussion (Wells & Allen, 2012). This is reflected in the study participants' responses in regard to principal leadership practices. Students have had little experience being out as trans students in school and therefore principal leaders have had little experience in supporting this group, specifically in the context of the larger school community. The idea of inclusive school community is what emerged initially with study participants.

Vincent stated clearly their perspective.

I want school principals to know it is not a choice. As a school principal it is your job to support all students. School staff need to be as supportive as they can and help a student out. I think that they (school staff/school principals) need to talk and understand members of the trans community. Talk to them (members of the transgender community) they want to talk. Make resources available to them like you would support any other student. I think as a teacher or school principal you have responsibility, there are rules to follow, you can't just disrespect students if they are gay or trans.

Study participants were very passionate when discussing community within schools. William said, "ahhhh it's all very basic. Honestly, it is just treat us the same as all the other kids, respect us, call us the right things. These are the biggest things that a principal could do for me."

Jacob supported this idea, “I just want to go to school and feel ok in my skin. That I am not going to be bullied for who I am.”

It is evident that transgender students in schools have been the target of bullying, violence, victimization, oppression and marginalization. The prevalence of this theme in all study participants’ experiences in school is clear. However, study participants seem to be aware of situations and circumstances within their school experiences where this was not always the case. Study participants appear to reflect on these more positive experiences as evidence of what needs to happen for transgender students in schools and the hope that eventually theirs and other transgender students school experiences may be far more positive.

Xander shared that currently there is a group of teachers and a school assistant principal working hard to support the transgender community in his school.

This group of teachers along with my assistant principal (designated assistant principal assigned to a specific group of students) are willing to sit and listen to you, help you and give you that one on one you need. They emphasise that the school is a community and that we do things together. They try to use appropriate pronouns and call us the proper names. They respect that if you are not called that name at home, that you are accommodated with that, so that they could have school meetings and not out the kid or make it hard for the kid if the parent does not accept their gender identity.

Max spoke about a similar experience and how this support was significant in how she felt at school.

I remember the first time I got an official piece of paper with my chosen name on it, not my birth name. There is an assistant principal here (current school) that always calls me by the right (chosen) name and the actual correct pronouns. This is really different from

other staff and other schools where I was constantly being misgendered and just invalidated to the point I just gave up. But not here with (name) assistant principal and a few teachers they seem to support you, so you do not always have to advocate for yourself, you've got help. It is kind of like a comforting feeling.

Although some study participants were able to share experiences that were positive and hopeful in shaping what transgender students might require from school principal leaders, others were not. The study participants who did not share a specific experience were able to articulate the importance of school principal leadership in constructing inclusive school communities. Jacob spoke about his idea of acceptance within a school community.

Schools need to be a welcoming community. I don't know really if welcoming is the right word. Schools need to be open communities. School Administrators need to be educated in things like trans culture or gay culture or any other member of the LGBTQ2+community. Just being able to mentally open themselves to being able to welcome these people into their lives and the school without the judgement about being a member of theLGTBQ2+ community.

Vincent seemed pragmatic in their perspective on how transgender students are supported within a school community. Vincent shared that,

In every community we want everyone to respect each other. There are always going to be those few that don't, but what you hope for is that the voice of those people that are open to allow people to be who there are, who they want to be, is stronger.

Luna was very prescriptive in what she felt were first steps for school administrators in creating inclusive school communities.

I would start with the legislation and guidelines documents you (researcher) spoke about. School principals must be aware of their responsibilities, aware of terms and that type of thing. It often tends to be situations of people not knowing and then behaving in ways or using terms that are disrespectful or making assumptions of LGBTQ2+ that cause so many problems. I have never been approached or spoken to directly or even in a group about what I thought as a trans student in high school. The trans community is very small and its always overlooked especially in a large high school. Ten students or less in over one thousand can be overlooked easily.

***Finding 3.2. Education: Knowing yourself.***

Study participants acknowledged that the more they become aware of themselves, in this case, the gender identity continuum and how they identify where they fit, the more probable it was that they could start to use this understanding as an aspect to how they fit within their communities. Specific to this study was their school community. Study participants indicated that the more school principals were able to provide the school community opportunities to be aware of and explore the continuum of gender diversity and share this within the school community, the more likely it would be that students struggling with issues related to gender identity or gender dysphoria would have an increased understanding of their own gender identity. Study participants suggested that this increased self-awareness would support them and how they identified the potential social and mental health issues that may be present as a result.

Study participants spoke about encountering information on the LGTBQ2+ community and the transgender community by chance. William shared how this occurred for him.

First off I never knew being trans was a thing... I guess the turning point for me was when I was watching a video online. It was just some random youtube video. I didn't

know anything different. At the end of the video it mentioned that he (the person featured in the video) used to be a girl. I was like wait! You can do that! From here I just started to look up a bunch of information. I thought that this could be right for me. I thought about it for a while and continued to do searches. Eventually I started to think I might be more comfortable identifying this way. I thought I needed to tell people this because I knew I could not keep going on as a tom boy type of thing.

Xander as well made the initial discover with regard to individuals identifying as transgender through online activity.

I kind of always knew I was different since I was a child. I just thought I was strange. I remember it was about a year before I came out I was feeling down for some time. I was searching online for stories of other youth that might be feeling like me. I found a story about a trans girl in the US that had committed suicide because of how she was being treated. This is the first time I thought I might be transgender. Before this I thought that you could only be bi, straight or gay and that was it. I knew I was none of these so I thought I must be confused.

Luna shares a similar experience.

When I was 14, I was staying at my dad's for the summer. I was watching a television show. This show had a character that identified in the LGBTQ2+ community. The show got cancelled. I heard this was because of the show's focus on an LGBTQ2+ character. This was my first experience with the terms around LGBTQ2+. Looking back, there were a few things in my past that had me starting to realize that I had been struggling with issues of gender since grade 6.

All the study participants had limited access to knowledge regarding the transgender community. A main theme that emerged was that if young people understood themselves better, in this case had an awareness of their gender identity, this knowledge would facilitate increased social, mental and physical health. Study participants identified that school principal leaders could support programming for young people that supplied this knowledge and understanding within the school communities.

Jacob shared his experience and reflection in this regard.

It's just how your brain works so there wasn't really a specific time that I knew (I was transgender). It was more like a feeling that slowly grew a subconscious type of feeling, you eventually become unhappy with yourself, and you need to do something about it. I didn't know anything about trans culture until one of my friends Chris bought me into the light of the LGTBQ2+ community. Before I always thought it was only gay and lesbian and I am not either one of those, so I was really confused as to who I was. She (Chris) started telling me about all the people she met that had identified as trans. I was like that is how I feel. That is who I am. When you can label yourself as trans you now have a title you can put yourself under, there is a label that helps you understand who you are, and there is more than just you. I know that everyone's experience is different but for my experience finally being able to understand who I was helped me figure out "what was wrong with me.

Max's insight clearly demonstrates the circumstances that are often present for transgender students in schools. Max offered her perspective on the importance of knowledge-building within the school community regarding marginalized and vulnerable student groups.

So in the beginning when you are trying to figure out what might be going on for yourself, for me I didn't have the knowledge of what being transgender was until high school, I didn't know you could choose your gender expression, so I was just constantly confused until grade 10. I was depressed and really didn't know why. Until I met another transgender individual and they kind of explained it to me. They explained what being trans was and talked about their experiences. This just turned on a light bulb for me. So I think it would be important if principals provided opportunities for students to gain an understanding of the trans community. Coming out at school was very frustrating for me. It was like having someone do something that was so annoying to you every single day, like calling you your old name or improper pronouns. You feel frustrated and alienated. It is not safe to be yourself in front of other people. I wanted people to see me for me. I wanted people to see me as confident. I wanted to be myself but that seemed impossible.

***Finding 3.3. Education: For school change.***

As study participants acknowledged in finding 3.2, the more they became aware of themselves, in this case, the gender identity continuum and how they identify where they fit, the more probable it was that they could start to use this understanding as an aspect to how they fit within their communities, specific in this study their school community. Study participants indicated that the more school principals were aware of gender diversity and shared this within the school community, thereby increasing the school community's awareness of the continuum of gender expression, the more likely it would be that the school community's acceptance of difference, as it relates specifically to gender identity and expression, would increase.

Jacob shared that intolerance, bullying, victimization and marginalization in school are about differences. He stated,

It's about the difference. That's what bullying is about, picking out the differences. What if we (students) had the knowledge to understand the differences that exist for each one of us? That difference is an aspect of sameness. It is something we all have. It makes us unique.

Max suggested that school administrators develop a rigorous education plan for schools that explores the multiple student experiences that exist within the community.

I think that education should start in the elementary schools. There should be guest speakers, activities and education that show who makes up the community. The younger you are the easier it might be to start developing and understanding of issues regarding LGBTQ2+. Maybe then those people (members of the LGBTQ2+ community) will not have to feel depressed and develop self-hate that leads to alienation. I think that a more open education that allows for conversation and discussion at an early age about sexual orientation or gender identity will benefit all members of the school community.

Vincent expressed a similar line of thinking.

I think education starting in elementary and junior high about being transgender is important. Trying to stop people's ignorance around the topic of being transgender, possibly helping people not to have to go through that life stage of confusion to help them find out who they are in life and have others more accepting of them when they do come out.

Luna and Vincent both spoke about principal leadership support in making knowledge and experiences of the LGBTQ2+ community available to all students in school. Luna indicated, the first step in creating inclusive school communities is sharing the knowledge people need to understand trans students." Vincent stated, "if there was education and resources to help kids



understand other students so that they recognize how harmful it is to bully and outcast others, that would be important.

William spoke about the potential discomfort or increase in bullying behaviour that one might assume arises from speaking about sexual orientation or gender identity.

I think a lot of kids feel that this might happen. But to me it's already happening so I think it can only help. I enjoy when people ask me things as it shows they are trying to understand. That they are trying to understand me as a person, as a person in their school. You can't automatically understand something without being told or having an experience that encourages that understanding. I am like ask me as many questions as you want as long as you are not being rude. I want you to understand me as it helps me understand myself and feel part of the school.

Throughout the interviews study participants expressed the hope that if school principal leaders would assume the leadership in creating opportunities for all students to gain knowledge, experiences and awareness of the trans community, then trans students themselves would gain a benefit through increased self-confidence and self-esteem. Additionally, other students in the school community would be far more accepting of differences, specifically as they relate to the student trans community because the students would have a far greater understanding of that group. Study participants indicated that for this to happen the principal needs to take the lead and be resolute in the desire to support all students, including the transgender student community. "There's always going to be those kids in every high school," states William, "the ones that will never seem to get it. That shouldn't stop us from supporting the ones who will."

Jacob spoke about his change of perspective.

I have had to work a lot on issues of trust, on trying to rely more on my school administrators, staff and school community. They promise you all kinds of things when you enter a new school. It's a big leap of faith whether to believe them or not. When I came to this school my belief was that the bullying was going to start all over again, and eventually I would just have to switch schools. I was thinking I had at least two more moves before I was going to graduate. These were my constant thoughts. I really did not want to come to this school or any school for that matter, but I came. After a year of being here I have realized that not everyone wants to make my life hell. That there are enough staff members and students that understand, that care who I am, and what I am going through.

William shared his thoughts that school principals need to be mentally ready and confident in order to be significant support for the transgender students in school.

There is going to be students and adults in school that are not in favor of being openly accepting of the LGBTQ2+ population. If the school principal cannot be clear in their support for the inclusion and safety of these students it is best that they not promise it.

Luna indicated that in her experience many school principals who said they did not tolerate bullying had behaviors that contradicted this.

Lots of school principals need to change their school bullying (anti bullying) programs. I don't think it is just a trans problem. I have been bullied my whole life in school. I have seen my bullies stand with the school principal on the anti-bully stage during our anti-bully assembly and say bullying is bad. I was like this is funny (sarcastic). I knew immediately that I was not safe.

All study participants expressed that the school principal must have a relationship with students and be accessible and visible as a supporter of the trans student population. Vincent stated, “It is important that students are able to go to the school principal so that they have someone to talk to that can make decisions to support their safety immediately and into the future.” Xander indicated,

Trans students deserve the respect and care of the school principal as do all students.

Principals must be aware that victimization occurs all the time, in class, in the hallways, on field trips, standing in line at the cafeteria that reports of bullying will be taken seriously and the victim supported.

Max shared her thoughts. “It is easy for the rights of some individuals to be abused in a school; it is the principal’s job to protect individuals and groups from this abuse.”

#### ***Finding 3.4. Role modeling.***

This research study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the actions and inactions of a school principal that impact the experiences of marginalized, vulnerable students in school. More specifically, the researcher examined the experiences of transgender students in an urban high school to understand the relationships between the school leadership practices and a targeted, marginalized, vulnerable group in public schools, the transgender school community. As a principal within the school board in which the research was conducted I had suspicions that at least some students would not be able to identify principal leadership practices that had a significant, positive impact on their school experience. Therefore, if the students could not cite examples of positive leadership practice from their own experiences, maybe they could identify role model behaviour in popular culture. Unfortunately, study participants did not identify current popular culture as providing positive role modeling in support of the transgender

community. Luna stated, “most of what I see in the media is the denial of trans rights.” Max agreed,

There are no trans youth characters going through transition that are being represented daily in the media that I know about. There seems to be a huge lack of representation of the diverse community of trans people. Too often, if it is represented, it is just a quick passing it really is no help in understanding the full experience.

Max expressed disappointment about how LGBTQ2+ is currently being represented in popular media. Max shared,

I would say I am disappointed, of course we are just starting the movement so I can't expect too much. I hope that we don't just get more representation about the trans community but more trans people in media itself.

William indicated that he felt that things were starting to appear in the popular media about transgender culture.

We still have a way to go, but I am seeing more representation. I see a lot more utubers talking about LGBTQ2+ issues. I think it is like anything, trans issues are a new thing to most people. I think now there are people just trying to start to bring trans issues forward. You could be disappointed that it is not as far as we would like, but it is probably hard to write about things you don't understand.

Xander's response seems to support how transgender issues are not separate but an aspect of victimization and marginalization that takes place for many individuals within society.

I think I am seeing more representation of the LGBTQ2+ community in the media. Trans representation not so much, but the lesbian and gay community are far more common on tv these days. I am noticing it is not just white male characters. There is more diversity

and there are now LGTBQ2+ characters playing themselves. So I am seeing some improvement and change.

Study participant interview data indicate that today's culture provides limited examples for school principal leaders to look to as the model of thoughtful, respectful, inclusive and professional practice. Participants recognized that the "out" trans community is a relatively new sector of North American society and therefore both the trans community and the community at large have had little time to understand this new reality. Study participants, even though they shared numerous experiences of being bullied, victimized and marginalized, remained hopeful that with increased knowledge and awareness within the school community, levels of tolerance, acceptance and inclusion, and an appreciation of diversity would increase.

## **Summary**

This chapter began with an overview of the case. Study participant profiles were shared. Following this was the presentation of research findings. The presentation of research findings included an explanation of the data coding process used and a brief summary and rationale for the data analysis. To gain an understanding of the actions and inactions of a school principal as they impact the experiences of an identified marginalized, vulnerable student population, the transgender student community, I coded the data from six transcribed semi-structured interviews with high school students identifying as transgender. Additional support for coding the research data came from my interview field notes. The findings were built from the problem, research questions and research designs. The findings were presented in a narrative form using verbatim quotes from student study participants. This narrative data was connected by themes and synthesized using exploratory text. The emphasis in the presentation of study participant research data was to have the reader understand the multiple perspectives of participants by using direct

quotes taken from the interview transcripts. The research findings were organized following the study's research questions.

The first section contained findings related to the question: "How do transgender youth experience various leadership practices?" A common theme revealed through the interview data was that students' experiences of being the victims of constant bullying and harassment because of their identification of being a member of the LGBTQ2+ population was significant. All study participants, when asked about their most memorable student experience, shared a negative experience. They indicated that the response from school leadership ran the continuum from some sympathy for their situation but no action, to ignoring the situation entirely, to actually blaming students for their own victimization and marginalization for identifying as a trans student. Four major findings emerged from the research data: (a) the significant level of bullying and harassment for trans students, (b) school administration's reluctance to intervene on trans issues, (c) trans students' washroom access and (d) issues that students might have in school related to being an adolescent are dismissed and defined only as issues related to the student identifying as trans.

The second section contained findings related to the second of the research study's questions: "How can the implementation of policy by a school principal be best facilitated so that the targeted group experiences the intended benefits for which that policy was created?" All study participants' interview responses for this question were very similar. The participants had very limited knowledge of the government legislation that impacts their experiences in school, specifically related to identifying as a member of the transgender community. Research findings for this question also established that the participants did not feel they had voice in the development, interpretation, implementation or enactment of government policy or school board

rules and regulations, specifically as these documents related to the transgender student population in school. One major finding emerged from the research data: the transgender students in this study had very little awareness and no voice in the development, interpretation, implementation and enactment of policy specifically targeted to support them and their school experience. Although officials involved in the development of this legislation sought out the participation, voices and insights of many transgender youth, it is apparent that the transgender students in this study had a limited awareness of the significant efforts made through policy developers to access and incorporate the voices of the transgender student population. At the school level, where this legislation is interpreted, implemented and enacted it appears that opportunities for transgender student voice for the study population was limited.

The third subsection contained findings related to the main research question: “What are the principal leadership practices that positively impact transgender youth in schools?” The study participants appeared to recognize and understand that it has only been a recent societal development that transgender students are “out” in high school. The participants acknowledged that due to this understanding the experiences of transgender students in high school is emerging. Therefore, the participants shared that knowledge development in school communities is key in developing school environments and principal leadership practices that support vulnerable, marginalized student populations, specifically as related to the transgender community in high schools. There were four major findings that emerged from the research data: (a) building school community, (b) education: knowing yourself, (c) education: for school change and (d) appropriate societal role models.

The study conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2 aligns well with study findings. The study conceptual framework references the necessity of school principal leaders to develop

new understandings that respect and include the diverse continuum of all students who participate in the North American education system. It is with the emerging understanding of the circumstances of the transgender student community in high school that principal leadership practice can be impacted in a manner that supports those practices that will positively impact this vulnerable marginalized student population.

This chapter presented the research findings of this case through the organization of the student study participants semi-structured interview data. There was an emphasis placed on using exact quotes from student study participants' interviews so that the voice of students was made evident and so that the reader may understand more fully the experiences of the students using their own words. The purpose of the following chapter is to provide interpretive insights into these findings in an attempt to analyze, synthesize and build a more holistic understanding of the case.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Analysis, Interpretations and Synthesis of Findings**

#### **Introduction**

This research study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of which actions and inactions by a school principal positively impact the experiences of marginalized, vulnerable students in school. More specifically the research examined the experiences of transgender students in an urban high school as the window into the relationships between the practice of school principal leadership and its impact upon a targeted, marginalized, vulnerable group in public schools, the transgender school community. The rationale for examining this topic is to better understand the in-school experiences of transgender students so that school principals will be better able to support the transgender student community, enable better principal leadership training in support of the transgender community, support the development and implementation of policy reflective of the transgender student community for which it was developed and potentially offer some opportunity to support other targeted, marginalized, vulnerable student groups.

For this case study I conducted six semi-structured interviews with students identifying as transgender attending a large urban high school. Through these interviews I attempted to gather data reflective of the lived experiences of transgender students in high school and the impact of the school principal's leadership related to these student experiences. This data was coded, analysed and organized by categories and sub categories guided by the conceptual framework (Page 42) and the themes that emerged relative to the research questions.

To achieve the objectives of this study I focused on three main questions; the first two are considered sub-questions of the final, primary question.

1. How do transgender youth experience various principal leadership practices?

2. How can the implementation of policy by a school principal be best facilitated so that the targeted group experiences the intended benefits for which the policy was created?
3. What are the principal leadership practices that positively impact transgender youth in school?

The first of the three research questions asked, “How do transgender youth experience various principal leadership practices?” Four findings were discovered: (1) a significant general level of bullying and harassment for transgender students, (2) school administration reluctance to intervene on transgender issues, (3) washroom access, and (4) all issues for these students being related to being transgender. The second research question asked, “How can the implementation of policy by a school principal be best facilitated so that the targeted group experiences the intended benefits for which the policy was created?” For this question there was one significant finding: transgender students have very little awareness and no voice in the development, interpretation and implementation of policy specifically targeted to support them and their school experience. The final, and primary research question asked, “What are the principal leadership practices that positively impact transgender youth in school?” For this question there were four findings: (1) building community, (2) education and support for transgender students knowing themselves, (3) education and support for others to know transgender students, and (4) opportunities for role modeling transgender participation in the context of the students’ communities.

All the findings were presented in Chapter 4. The findings align well with the work of MacGillivray (2012), whose research indicated that transgender students have three main concerns regarding their school experiences: the harassment and violence they face during their

school day, the stress and fear they face resulting from policy implementation designed to keep them safe but generally exposes them to being outed and segregated as a means of protection, and the general lack of understanding of transgender student issues by educators and other students. Theoharis (2010) identifies four kinds of injustices observed by school leaders that require disruption in the pursuit of social justice: (1) school climates are not welcoming or safe for marginalized students, (2) school structures and policy are often responsible for the marginalization and segregation of specific student groups, (3) the professional knowledge, attitudes and actions of teaching staff is inadequate to support all students, and (4) marginalized student groups display the lowest levels of academic achievement. Whereas the last chapter used student study participant' interview data to tell the story of the research this chapter reconstructs, analyzes and synthesizes the results to build a more holistic understanding of the case being studied.

### **Analysis, Interpretation and Synthesis**

The following section is based on Bloomberg and Volpe's (2012) five elements of analysis that allow the researcher to connect patterns and themes that emerge from the research findings. These are the steps I took in this research study:

- 1) Understanding the connections among the research study participants' data.
- 2) Explaining these connections.
- 3) Identifying the anticipated, as well as the unexpected relationships and connections in the research findings.
- 4) Looking for consistency and inconsistency within the educational research literature and among research participant data.

- 5) The final step in this process was to explore ways that the research participant findings go beyond the research literature.

This discussion is intended to deepen and enrich our understanding of which actions and inactions by a school principal positively impact the experiences of marginalized, vulnerable students, specifically the transgender student population, in school.

**Research Question 1. How do transgender youth experience various principal leadership practices?**

In the research study the first question asked was, how do transgender youth experience various leadership practices? The four findings related to this question are discussed below.

***Finding 1.1. Significant level of bullying and harassment for transgender students.***

Taylor and Peter (2011) reported that 95% of Canadian transgender teenagers feel unsafe daily at school. Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen and Palmer (2012) indicated that students identifying as members of the LGBTQ2+ community in high school have lower grade point averages, miss more school time and are less likely to pursue post-secondary study as the result of the consistent harassment and bullying they experience in school. As stated in chapter one, the research literature states that principals must address the individual developmental needs of each student by ensuring equity, access, and educational opportunity for all students (Noddings, 2005a, 2005b; Robinson, 2011; Savage & Harley, 2009). All study participants, when asked to talk about their most memorable school experience, shared an experience they perceived as negative and physically and emotionally abusive and was met with minimal intervention by the school principal. They also indicated that this bullying and harassment was emotional through behaviors such as name calling and isolation and exclusion, and physical through behaviors such as being hit, pushed, and grabbed or having something thrown at them. Two thirds of the

participants shared that a significant portion of the harassment was sexual through behaviors such as suggestions of performing sexual acts, sexual name calling and sexual groping.

Study participants all talked about how the bullying and harassment was daily, consistent and pervasive in their high school experiences. The prevalence of homophobic and transphobic cultures in North American high schools is well documented (Taylor & Peter, 2011). Studies on the high school lives of LGBTQ2+ students have identified overarching trends: the harassment and social exclusion of LGBTQ2+ students, the lack of awareness of the LGBTQ2+ community and the lack of intervention by school administration in support of the LGBTQ2+ community (Meyer, Taylor, & Peter, 2015). Pascoe (2011) states that homophobia and transphobia are inscribed in minutest details in school-based structures, activities, interactions and leadership. Eptein, O'Flynn and Telford (2003) states that schools are places where heterosexuality and gender conformity are normalized and thus are made mandatory in a variety of means. The inequities that result from the above circumstances exist on many levels for the LGBTQ2+ communities and are allowed and encouraged by the absence of intervention by school administration. In essence, the lack of intervention supports the dominance of certain student groups by denying the rights of marginalized, vulnerable student populations (Pascoe, 2011).

All students in the research study reported that they had registered in more than one high school. Four students had registered in two different high schools, one student in three high schools and one student in their fourth high school. The participants appeared to be resigned to the idea that moving high schools was their fate as a student identifying as transgender. Frequent school transfers and a weakening of school performance is reported in the research (Kosciw et al., 2012). Four of the six students require an extra year of high school because of the impact of the harassment, bullying and violence they experienced in high school. This pattern of

harassment, bullying, limited school attendance, poor achievement and finally school withdrawal was evident in the participants' responses.

Luna's statement regarding the follow-up of one of her school principals to an issue of school harassment illustrates how this pattern starts for transgender students. "Nothing really happened (in response to the incident), so I started to miss school all together. It wasn't long before I wasn't going to school at all. I failed all my classes that semester."

Jacob shared how these experiences changed what he expected from school.

I have had to work a lot on issues of trust, on trying to rely more on my school administrators, staff, and school community. They (school administration) promise you all kinds of things when you enter a new school. It's a big leap of faith whether to believe them or not. When I came to this school my belief was that the bullying was going to start all over again, and eventually I would just have to switch schools. I was thinking I had at least two more moves before I was going to graduate.

It is apparent from this research that the harassment, bullying and violence was daily, consistent and pervasive in the participants' high school experiences, and principals imposed limited consequences for the perpetrators and limited support for the victims. According to Kosciw et al. (2012) it is this limited response to the maltreatment of marginalized, vulnerable student populations that reproduces and supports hostile school environments for these student groups.

***Finding 1.2. School administration reluctance to intervene on transgender issues.***

A 2009 study showed that 90% of principal respondents reported having heard anti-LGTBQ2+ slurs in their schools, yet only 20% had engaged in activities to foster a safer school environment for LGTBQ2+ students (GLSEN, 2009). A study involving recent graduates of a principal

preparation program in the southern United States found that 57% agreed that being lesbian, bisexual, gay, or transgender was a choice. These candidates also rated themselves as having a low level of knowledge and understanding of LGTBQ2+ issues, values, family systems and history (Kemp-Graham, 2015). Kosciw et al. (2012) presented the National Climate survey that showed 56.9% of LGTBQ2+ students reported hearing homophobic or transphobic remarks from school staff members. In that study, of the LGTBQ2+ students that reported an incident, 36% indicated that school administration did nothing in response (Kosciw et al., 2012). According to Greytak, Kosciw and Diaz (2009) over a third of transgender students reported hearing staff make negative comments in regard to students' gender. Less than a fifth of these students stated that school staff intervened as a result (Greytak et al., 2009). Negative principal and school staff attitudes toward LGTBQ2+ students result in the underreporting of incidents of harassment, bullying and violence perpetrated against the LGTBQ2+ student community because students believe that either no action will be taken or that the reporting of an incident could make the situation worse (GLSEN, 2009; Kemp-Graham, 2015; O'Malley & Capper, 2015). All study participants shared experiences in which the school principal was a witness to, was aware of, or participated in situations that minimally ignored the harassment, bullying and violence of the LGTBQ2+ student community, or, in the more extreme end, validated the behaviors of the perpetrators. The participants agreed that in some circumstances the response of the school principal appeared to indicate that as a member of the LGTBQ2+ community any harassment, bullying or violence perpetrated against them was their fault as a member of the transgender community. Vincent's statement clearly articulates the sentiments of all student study participants in this regard.

They just didn't seem to care. When your experience at school is that people are picked on regardless, constantly being called gay as an insult and nothing is done you learn to stay private and ignore as best you can.

Xander stated, "They (school principal and teachers) enabled other people to be kind of transphobic and homophobic, as they were allowed to make those comments (transphobic and homophobic) during class time."

Within the LGBTQ2+ population transgender students experience higher rates of discrimination, bullying and physical assault due to their gender expression (Boyland, Swenson, Ellis, Coleman, & Boyland, 2016). Meyer et al. (2015) indicated that principals are generally unaware of the level of bullying going on in their schools and are likely to perceive the atmosphere of their schools as substantially safer than do the students in the school. The repetition of bullying behaviour in schools suggests that this is the normal to be expected, and that transphobia and homophobia will continue to present as a significant barrier for inclusion of vulnerable, marginalized students in school (Kumashiro, 2002). Meyer et al. (2015) also discussed school culture as a mixture of things that are explicitly taught and those things that are powerful yet implicit, hidden in plain sight, referred to as the hidden curriculum. Pascoe (2011) pointed out that school ceremonies and traditions, often overseen by school principals, are often encoded with heteronormative messages that reinforce the exclusion of the LGBTQ2+ student community. Jacob spoke about witnessing a popular male student standing on stage with the school principal speaking about how bullying was not to be tolerated. Jacob stated, "I knew I had no chance, there was my bully standing beside my school principal."

Given the potential impact of the hidden curriculum as described by Meyer et al. (2015), principal leaders must position themselves in terms of what they say, their modes of expression,



and the way they act. Holding a leadership position, in this case, a school principalship, does not make one a leader; it only provides an occupational platform (Wang, 2018). The principal's positioning determines the manner in which students, parents, teachers and other stakeholders interact with the principals, and eventually determines their success as advocates for marginalized, vulnerable student populations. Principals have an obligation to protect students from anti-LGTBQ2+ harassment, just as they have an obligation to protect students from other forms of harassment. However, this obligation goes beyond simply protecting LGBTQ2+ students; it includes the promotion of attitudes that are foundational in creating school cultures of inclusion and acceptance and an appreciation of diversity (Boyland et al., 2016). Principals are key players in setting expectations for students and staff behaviours, as well as their own response to LGBTQ2+ issues (Mugisha, 2015).

Principals are responsible for leadership in social change, particularly regarding the treatment of marginalized or vulnerable students (Mugisha, 2015). A growing body of leadership research calls for school principal leaders to be social justice advocates (Bogotch & Shields, 2014; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Furman, 2012). To be social justice advocates principals must examine the current social and educational arrangement and take actions that promote school initiatives and practices that support justice and equity. Social justice leadership requires that the unequal circumstances of marginalized, vulnerable groups are recognized and direct action is taken toward eliminating these inequities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). The essence of social justice leadership is to question the conditions of inequity, oppression, and marginalization in schools and to bring about positive change within school and the broader community (Mafora, 2013). Fulfilling the true meaning of public education demands attention

and action from school leaders in regard to the unmet needs of marginalized, vulnerable youth (Fullan, 2011).

School principals need to act on behalf of marginalized, vulnerable student populations regardless of their awareness of the existence of that population in their schools. When schools wait until a transgender student is identified within the school community often that student becomes more vulnerable. This occurs as the school community associates any change as a result of this one student rather than as a betterment of the community as a whole (Meyer et al., 2015). Common barriers that principals face in attempts to support social justice leadership for marginalized, vulnerable student populations are: the momentum of the status quo, obstructive personal and staff beliefs and attitudes, privileged parental expectations, deficit thinking about marginalized groups, an emphasis on the technical aspect of leadership, and the cost or burden to the individual that engages in social justice leadership (Furman, 2012; Theoharis, 2010). Wang (2018) indicated that school principals need to demonstrate the courage and willingness to take action and to disrupt unjust systematic structures and practices, thereby creating a positive school climate in which all students feel valued, respected and accepted.

***Finding 1.3. Washroom access.***

Washroom use in school for transgender students is the focus of many conversations at the legislative, board and school level in many North American jurisdictions. As evident in this study and reported by Kosciw et al., (2012) the rigid norms of gender and sexuality are systematically entrenched in all aspects of North American schools. MacGillivray (2012) indicates that there are three main concerns for transgender students in high school: harassment and violence, the fear of gender segregation in facilities and programming, and the concern of transgender students that if they raise concerns they will be ignored by students, school staff and

school administration. Sadowski (2016) found that over 60% of students identifying as transgender in high school were required to use washrooms and changing rooms inconsistent with their gender identity.

Current policy development concerning the use of washrooms in North American schools allows students to use the washroom consistent with their asserted gender identity. In situations where separate facilities exist for male and female students, a transgender student may use the facility that corresponds to their asserted gender identity and not necessarily their natal gender. This policy further states that if a student desires increased privacy, school administration must make every effort to provide reasonable access to alternative, single stall washrooms such as the ones generally located in a school's main office or health nurse office. However, transgender students must not be limited only to the single stall washrooms (Sadowski, 2016).

The use of washrooms appeared to bring to the forefront for all student study participants the complexity of the issues that face transgender students in school on a daily basis. Issues of personal safety, recognition, awareness, acceptance and inclusion of the transgender student community, as well as support from students, staff and school administration are all pertinent to the discussion of washroom use for transgender students in high school. Max's response in his interview highlights the issue and reflects what was shared by all study participants.

They (school administration) don't seem to take the risk seriously. They just say use the washroom you want, but they never took into consideration that for trans students there is a fear factor, especially when it comes to cis men, if they can be rude and aggressive in the hallways it's terrifying to think what they could do to you in a bathroom or change room where it's private and isolated.

***Finding 1.4. All issues are related to being transgender.***

It is important that school communities as lead by the school principal affirm the safety, caring, support and success of all students, including the transgender student community, equally. Just as important as it is to affirm the transgender student community in relation to their gender identity, it is important to remember that these identities exist in the broader context of who they are as a whole person (Sadowski, 2016). This broader context includes issues of race, ethnicity, socioeconomics, physical health, mental health, family of origin and learning among many other considerations.

Max articulated this idea in her interview.

I think it is just changing people's mindsets just because an individual is trans doesn't make them different from every other student. They still have the same problems and issues as other students... Sometimes when you ask for help from teachers or school administrators they just say it is just because you are trans, don't worry about it you'll get over it at some point. So their helpfulness is limited because they see you in this square and all your problems are because you are trans.

William stated, "it is like all things get put down to being trans as opposed to maybe some issues being related to family or generally being an adolescent." Transgender students report that they are often very specific and clear that their behaviour or circumstance has nothing to do with their gender identity; however, the follow-up by teachers, parents and school administration focuses on their identity as a transgender student. Hefner (1998) indicated that student support systems in schools require that students have access to social, emotional and academic resources that support their holistic development. School programs and staff often fail to consider the students they serve. Rarely are students given agency to discuss, choose and lead

aspects of the school programming (Hefner, 1998; Pascoe, 2011). Lac and Cumings Mansfield (2018) suggested that school administration and teaching staff working alongside students and allowing students to share their perspectives in creating solutions to problems can be very powerful for the individual students and for the whole school community. Fielding (2001) further articulated that student voice, as described above, runs along a continuum, ranging from students as data sources, using student work to inform instruction, to students as researchers, where students drive in school inquiries and initiate change within the school community. This approach not only will reduce the tendency of school administration to view transgender issues within their community as a problem to be solved but instead offer a more critical approach, examining the structural factors that can be expanded to support the possibilities for all students to learn and contribute to their full potential and that of the school community (Meyers et al., 2015). Silins and Murray-Harvey (1998) recognize the growing responsibility of schools to provide and encourage an array of supports and experiences that enable the psychological, emotional, social and physical development of all students.

**Research Question 2. How can the implementation of policy by a school principal best be facilitated so that the targeted group experiences the intended benefits from which the policy was created?**

In the research study the second question asked was: how can the implementation of policy by a school principal be best facilitated so that the targeted group experiences the intended benefits for which the policy was created? This question was asked to gain an understanding of the level of participation, involvement or voice that transgender students had in the development, interpretation or implementation of educational policy intended to support their school experience. There was one finding for this research question: trans students have very little

awareness and no voice in the development, interpretation and implementation of policy specifically targeted to support them and their school experience.

***Finding 2.1. Transgender students in this study have little awareness and no voice in the development, interpretation, implementation and enactment of policy specifically targeted to support them and their school experience.***

Specific to this research, Bill 10, An Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014), and the associated Guidelines for *Best Practice: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions* (Alberta Education, 2016) were the policy documents referenced for the study participants. All study participants were unaware of these policy documents. Luna's response was indicative of all student study participants' knowledge of the policy specifically targeted to support the LGBTQ2+ community in school, "I didn't know these (policy documents) existed until now so they could not have had a noticeable impact."

By virtue of the fact that this research study has been conducted it is apparent that efforts of jurisdictions to protect LGBTQ2+ students through policy development are minimally bringing issues of LGBTQ2+ students to the surface and providing opportunity that the issues of this marginalized, vulnerable can be more readily seen by all community members. In the very recent past the assumption of practice was that all students were heterosexual and therefore school policy and practice reflected this. This scenario created very hostile school environments for the LGBTQ2+ population and made it very difficult for issues of LGBTQ2+ discrimination to come to the surface (Treadway & Yokoam, 1992). For the LGBTQ2+ student community in schools this oppressive circumstance made it impossible to feel empowered because the system of support was often working counter to their identity acknowledgement and acceptance.

According to Education Evolution (2005), traditional educational systems expect that students have the responsibility to adapt to the system in a one size fits all approach to education. Students in this environment state that the main interest of school administrators is maintaining order and controlling behaviour rather than offering opportunities for students to share their views on their schooling (Groves & Welsh, 2010). Max related a conversation she had with a school principal, “The staff and principal just didn’t take it seriously (student concern) they never had an actual sit down with me to talk about what I wanted. They just did what they thought was easiest.” Lac and Cumings Mansfield (2018) indicated that educational policies and pivotal decisions are made on behalf of the students and families most impacted rather than with them. Luna shared, “I have never been approached or spoken to directly or even as a group about what I thought as a trans student in high school.”

Fullan (2001) posed the question: what would happen if we treated students and families as individuals whose opinions matter? It is this question and the conversations that it evokes that have seen student voice grow louder and more powerful in recent educational research (Education Evolution, 2005). Roberts and Kay (1997) stated that students’ views have the capacity to provide new and deeper insights into the persisting challenges facing schools in relationship to public education’s ever-increasing mandates reflective of North America’s ever-increasing diversity. Groves and Welsh (2010) promoted the idea that school administrators could learn a great deal from the views of students given their distinct vantage point in the school community. If school administrators are to take seriously the challenge of improving the school experiences of all students, including those currently marginalized and made vulnerable, then the experiences of students must be considered important (Groves and Welsh, 2010). Students’ views and insights, however, are rarely sought by school principals (Ainley, 1995: Roberts &

Kay, 1997). High school students are capable of holding well-articulated views regarding all aspects of their lives, including school. Students' views accurately reflect how students experience school—what they want and what they need from their school experience (Ainley, 1995).

School administrators must choose leadership behaviors that lead to the development of school policy and implementation of school practices that address harassment, bullying and violence and that promote equality for all students, specifically the transgender student community (Kemp-Graham, 2015; Mugisha, 2015; O'Malley & Capper, 2015). Freire (1970) insisted that authentic change requires active examination and recognition of how policy historically and presently shapes oppression. That author also stated that school leaders must learn to recognize how educational policy and the practices that stem from that policy create oppression for marginalized, vulnerable student populations. Only then, according to Freire (1970), will a school leader understand the importance of leading with a social justice stance and the essential role student voice plays in school reform. School organizations benefit when adolescents are given voice in the policy and practices of the institution (Mitra, 2008; Brion-Meisels, 2015). Ryan (2006) stated that principal practices necessary for social justice leadership must include advocating for inclusion, educating stakeholders, developing critical consciousness, nurturing dialogue, emphasizing student learning, and adopting inclusive decision making and policy development strategies that incorporate all stakeholders especially students.

**Research Question 3. What are the principal leadership practices that positively impact transgender youth in school?**

The main research question asked in this study was: what are the principal leadership practices that positively impact transgender youth in school? My hope was that the data collected



from the study participants' interview responses to this question would offer insight into which actions and inactions by school principals positively impact the experiences of marginalized, vulnerable students in school, more specifically, the experiences of transgender students in an urban high school. There are four findings for this question: building community, education and support for transgender students knowing themselves, education and support for others to know transgender students and opportunities for role modeling transgender participation in the context of their communities.

***Finding 3.1. Building community.***

Theoharis (2010) indicated that school principal leaders looking to support all students must create school climates that support all students as members of the school community. Specific attention must be made to understand and welcome marginalized student groups. Vincent stated, "I want school principals to know that it is not a choice. As a school principal it is your job to support all students." All study participants indicated that the creation of school communities that support all students was a critical component of principal leadership practice that would most positively impact the school experiences of marginalized, vulnerable student populations. Williams shared,

I think it is all very basic. Honestly, it is just treat us the same as all the other kids, respect us ... I just want to be comfortable in my own skin. That I am not going to be bullied for who I am... These are the biggest things that a principal could do for me.

Poon and Cohen (2012) suggested that when school leaders value and recognize the lived experiences of students, schools become more inclusive and welcoming for all student groups. A significant barrier for principal leaders who want to create school cultures inclusive of all student populations is the belief that the desire to create comfort within the school community does not

allow for the learning and change that occurs through the exploration of those things that create the discomfort and resistance to traditional school practices (Kumashiro, 2002). Vincent's reflection highlights this potential barrier,

In every community we should want everyone to respect each other. There are always going to be those few that don't, but what you hope for is that the voice of those people that are open to allow people to be who they are, who they want to be, is stronger.

Luc and Cumings Mansfield (2018) indicated that principal leaders who want to support all students, through understanding and supporting the needs of all students, must have a firm understanding of the concepts of power over and power with. Wang (2018) contended that there must be a fundamental shift in the concept of schooling from a service provided to students to the concept of education belonging to students. This means that leadership is not about ruling but is about people and relationships. It is in the relationship between students and staff members that each other's perspectives are acknowledged and alliances are built that work against the oppressive structures that exist in schools (Foster, 1989). In order for this shift to occur students must be empowered to actively work against the systems that oppress them (Sinclair & Reece, 2015). Youth experience this empowerment in three ways: having and using knowledge, taking action, and developing relationships of support. Social democracy places an emphasis on the equality of educational opportunity for all students. In schools this requires educational leaders to adhere to the democratic ideals in the daily operation of the school and to address the social, emotional and learning needs of marginalized and vulnerable student groups (Gardner & Crockwell, 2006). Wang (2018) argued that student empowerment in education must balance the commitments to the personal growth of students with that of the growth of society. Through this, students are empowered to take responsibility for their academic and social lives as leaders

in their own education. When students individually are given the opportunity to engage in this level of responsibility, social structures are created that promote inclusive school communities (Foster, 1989).

The complexity of North American school populations demands that school leaders understand and address issues of equity and social justice for all students (Kemp-Graham, 2015; O'Malley & Capper, 2015). Luna stated, "The trans community is very small and its always overlooked especially in a large high school. Ten students or less in over a thousand can be overlooked easily." Principals must strive to create conditions that allow all students to be successful. Successful school leadership must support the development of positive school communities that are responsive to students' social, emotional, physical and academic needs. It is the principal's professional, moral and ethical responsibility to lead these efforts (Boyland et al., 2016). According to Freire (1970), respecting people as subjects of their own lives rather than objects in ours is essential to human growth and development. Freire (1970) declares, "Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a burning building" (pp. 65). Similarly, attempting to change schools without involving students robs the students of the opportunity to develop their leadership capacity and be agents of change within the school community (Wang, 2018).

### ***Finding 3.2. Education: Knowing yourself.***

For generations youth have played a significant role in societal change despite the enduring view of youth that cast them in a pessimistic light. The fact that youth have historically been at the forefront of social activism, the dominant discourse in society still positions youth as the source of societal ills (Hosang, 2006). Youth are constructed as passive receivers of mandates

rather than agents of change, restricting youth's potential to contribute and essentially silencing youth voices (Brion-Meisels, 2015; Vadeboncoeur & Stevens, 2005). Government policy consequently tends to focus on controlling and containing youth rather than creating spaces to include students in self-governance and decision-making processes (Mitra, 2008). Saul (2005) pointed out that youth in schools (students) are those individuals who can most accurately discern what helps them grow, develop and learn and what does not. It is only through listening to students' views that we will come to understand what actions will be most beneficial in this regard. Freire (1970) argued that oppressed populations have the right to critical consciousness, a recognition of the inequities that exist within our society and how policy has directly impacted and shaped the oppression of these marginalized, vulnerable groups. A significant component of Freire's (1970) critical consciousness is the ability of individuals to know and understand themselves. Through the discovery of self, individuals will begin to recognize their own capabilities, power and influence in the environment that surrounds them. All study participants acknowledged that having direct, intentional support and access to information regarding the LGBTQ2+ community, specifically the transgender community, was critical to their success at school. Study participants indicated that they needed to be aware of their own identity and what that meant for them personally, as a member of a family and community, before they could begin to negotiate and advocate for themselves and transgender students within the school community. Jacob shared in his interview,

When you can label yourself as trans you now have a title you can put yourself under, there is a label that helps you understand who you are, and there is more than just you. I know that everyone's experience is different but for my experience finally being able to understand who I was helped me figure out what was wrong with me.

Smyth (2006) stated that principals need to steer away from a compliance model approach to schooling, and advocated for a form of schooling that requires students to be actively involved and responsible and participants in their learning. To do this, students need to have access to information and the support necessary to understand who they are in the context of the communities in which they exist. According to Cook-Sather (2007), when students are provided the information to understand themselves and given the opportunity to incorporate this understanding within the school community, all stakeholders—students, teachers and school administrators—benefit. As the knowledge of self, self-awareness and self-understanding of transgender students increases, so do those factors develop for adult supporters creating the potential for change inside and outside of the school community (Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018). Silva (2001) indicated that student voice initiatives strengthen young people's critical consciousness, equipping students with the sociopolitical skill set and tools to better understand and analyze how social, historical, political, and economic structures perpetuate inequities in schools and society. Students and teachers, even if they are not direct participants in student voice initiatives, benefit when structures and processes are in place to elevate the voices and perspectives of all student groups inclusive of the transgender student community (Poon & Cohen, 2012).

Wang (2018) indicated that principal leadership in schools must ensure that members of relatively disadvantaged groups have opportunities to express their experiences, needs and opinions in situations where others can hear and appreciate this perspective. Max shared,

I think it would be important if principals provided opportunities for students to gain an understanding of the trans community... you feel frustrated and alienated. It is not safe to

be yourself in front of other people. I want people to see me as confident. I wanted to be myself but that seemed impossible.

Ryan (2006) states in order for marginalized, vulnerable student populations to take advantage of opportunities for voice within the school community the school principal must establish leadership practices that promote dialogue with these students individually and collectively. Relationships that are collaborative, reciprocal and horizontal as well as caring, equitable and fluid between school administration and marginalized, vulnerable student groups are essential (Wang, 2018).

When marginalized, vulnerable student populations are provided opportunities to share their experiences in a safe, supported, caring school environment they are more likely to do so. When this voice is seen to have an impact on change, these student communities begin to accept greater responsibility for their own learning and school experience (Education Evolution, 2005). The extent to which students accept responsibility for their learning and school experiences has a significant influence in how they perceive learning and school and their levels of achievement (Roberts & Kay, 1997). Rather than assuming the students know what they think and believe about themselves, school principals must actively seek out students' perspectives by creating opportunities for students to engage in a relationship that supports a level of communication that allows understanding to occur (Damiani, 2014).

Critical theorists have long acknowledged schools as potential sites for resistance to social change and the maintenance of the status quo; however, these same scholars also recognize the potential for schools as sites that facilitate social change (Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2018). Having students disrupt the status quo and create change in traditional societal institutions, such as schools, requires that students are able to share experiences, needs and

opinions that provide such resistance (Poon & Cohen, 2012). According to Lac and Cumings Mansfield (2018), the key behaviors that principal leaders need to employ to amplify and prioritize the voices of young people in schools include a publicly shared belief that student voice is important, positioning students so that they may understand themselves and be leaders in their school and commitment to creating opportunity for student voice to be heard and reflected in the school community.

***Finding 3.3. Education: For school change.***

Contemporary principal leadership embraces a very broad concept of social justice that includes not only fairness, equity, participation, and empowerment, but also democracy, social transformation, inclusion, critical approach, and ethical, moral care (Wang, 2018). Societal transformation through social justice principal leadership in schools is achieved through the examination and understanding of the social, political and economic conditions in which we live and followed by actions that challenge these conditions, supporting those most marginalized and vulnerable as a result (Shields, 2004). Sergiovani (2009) and Fullan (2003) summarized the issue succinctly in describing school principal leadership as a moral imperative that extends past academic achievement and includes a commitment to the democratic values of justice and equity for all members of the school community.

All study participants indicated that the more school principals were aware of gender diversity and gender expression and shared this information within the school community, the greater would be the school communities' awareness of gender diversity and gender expression. Study participants all shared a very optimistic perspective that with an increase of knowledge about the transgender student population, all students would become much more accepting of

diversity within the school community, specific to this study the transgender student community. Jacob shared his thoughts.

It's about difference. That's what bullying is about, picking out the differences. What if we (students) had the knowledge to understand the differences that exist for each one of us? That difference is an aspect of sameness. It is something we all have. It makes us unique.

Luna indicated, "the first step in creating inclusive school communities is sharing the knowledge that people need to understand trans students."

A reoccurring theme in educational research on school change is that the school principal is pivotal in creating the necessity for change and is instrumental in making the realities of this change happen (Theoharis, 2010). Theoharis (2010) further stated that principals who are effective in this manner are able to recognize the larger call to social action and focus their leadership on issues of equity and justice. For student voice initiatives to thrive within schools there must be a concerted effort by the school principal to value and support change and to be seen as a driving force leading change (Groves & Welsh, 2010; Lac and Cumings Mansfield, (2018). Study participants were unanimous that the school principal was in a critical role in supporting all students inclusive of those student communities left marginalized and vulnerable within the school environment. The participants shared the opinion that if the experiences of transgender students in high schools was to change the leadership of the school principal would have had a significant impact. As stated by Max, "it is easy for the rights of some individuals to be abused in a school. It is the principal's job to protect individuals and groups from this abuse."

Principals must act ethically and compassionately on behalf of every child. To do this, Boyland et al. (2016) states that school principals will need to act courageously to intervene on



behalf of marginalized, vulnerable minority student communities. Unfortunately, research indicates that principal training tends to focus on the view of school leadership as managers and bureaucrats instead of community leaders charged with addressing issues of inequity and marginalization (Theoharis, 2010; Rapp, 2002). Rapp (2002) found that 90% of school-based leaders and university faculty in the area of educational leadership valued technical leadership over moral or courageous leadership. Furthermore, principals that view their work through a social justice frame do not fit traditional ideas of principal leadership and therefore evaluation processes, collegial support, and community feedback tend not to be reflective or supportive of their work (Theoharis, 2010). Wang (2018) reported that this results in principals being trained, assessed and rewarded for maintaining this technical, traditional leadership style that supports the maintenance of the inequitable status quo.

Boyland et al. (2016) suggested eight actions that principals must take in their leadership role in supporting the LGBTQ2+ student community in high school. These suggestions align well with the suggests of students that participated in this study. School principals must:

1. create, share and enforce policies that support the inclusion of all students, specifically the LGBTQ2+, and specific to this study, the transgender community.
2. model for others in ways that are genuine and visible, their support of the LGBTQ2+, and specific to this study, the transgender student community.
3. support the establishment of student clubs that support marginalized, vulnerable student groups.
4. establish processes of communication so that the voices of the LGBTQ2+, and specific to this study, the transgender community are heard and valued and

have impact on the school environment. This communication must be extended to community stakeholders.

5. make information pertaining to the LGBTQ2+ student population, specifically the transgender community, accessible to all students and staff.
6. make evident the experiences of the LGBTQ2+, specifically the transgender community through school activities, curriculum, special events and guest speakers.
7. Provide staff training on understanding and preventing LGBTQ2+ and specific to this study, transgender harassment and discrimination.
8. Establish norms for the handling of issues specific to transgender students such as student records and washroom use.

***Finding 3.4. Role modeling.***

Study participants were unable to identify role models within society that would offer to school principals examples of positive practices that support the transgender student community. I assumed initially that transgender students may have had very few, if any, experiences with school-based leaders that they would have identified as positive. The media system, like the education system, is one of society's key institutions and as such plays a significant role in the establishment of cultural norms (Masterman, 2001). According to Couldry (2003), television, film, print, internet, and other digital realms support individuals and groups within society to develop the ways they see themselves and their connections to the social world. Robinson (2016) found that youth spend more time with social media than any other institution, including school. Youth are growing up in a media-centric environment. As a result, media in all its forms has become one of the most prominent teaching tools for North American society. The media not

only markets products, ideas, values and attitudes, but also creates socially acceptable hegemonic behaviour and attitudes for adults and youth alike (Mortiz, 2003; Couldry, 2003; Reed, 2005). It is through the media that many cultures and groups within society clarify the dominant values and beliefs, while minority groups and subcultures, including the transgender community, are left to negotiate their place within the dominant culture by scanning for positive media representation or critically interrogating the negative images and stereotypes (Robinson, 2016).

Although none of the study participants could identify significant positive media representatives of the transgender community they did identify reasons why this might be the current reality. Max stated, “we are just starting the movement so we can’t expect too much.” William shared a similar thought,

I think it is like anything, trans issues are a new thing to most people ... You could be disappointed that it is not as far as we would like, but it is probably hard to write (represent) about things you don’t understand.

The informal pedagogies of popular media in all its forms appears to be quickly surpassing the formal educational pedagogies present in schools. The images youth and adults are exposed to everyday in the media are not just forms of entertainment but serve as a powerful teacher of youth and adults about their world and culture and the roles they play within it (Robinson, 2016). Returning to Research Finding 1.2 Education: Knowing Yourself, four of the six participants’ first discovery of the term transgender was through the media, one through television and three through the internet. As shared by William,

First off I didn’t know being trans was a thing ... I guess the turning point for me was when I was watching a video online. At the end of the video it mentioned that he (the person featured in the video) used to be a girl.

No study participant identified a positive example of leadership in media that school principals could use as a role model for practice. However, the participants did recognize that the limited portrayal of the transgender community in media might be because the out transgender community is a relatively new condition within North American society. It is clear that the media, particularly YouTube, will play a significant role in informing youth about pertinent social and culture issues. To be significant effectors, school principals must be in tune with the various forms of media students are accessing and the attitudes, values and beliefs they are exposed to.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this chapter was to build a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study, specifically, those actions and inactions of a school principal as they impact the school experiences of an identified marginalized, vulnerable student population, the transgender student community. By providing analysis, synthesis and interpretative insights into the research findings and adhering to the conceptual framework, this chapter aimed to understand the connecting patterns and themes when compared and contrasted with issues in the research literature. The implications of the findings of this study were intended to enrich the understanding of principal leadership practices in schools that support the success of marginalized, vulnerable student populations, specific to this study, the transgender student population in high school.

The findings of this research study indicate that the current practices of school principals leave the transgender student community as a significantly marginalized and vulnerable student group. Study participants shared experiences of bullying, harassment, low achievement, school avoidance and school transfer as normal aspects of their school experiences. The participants

expressed the necessity of school principals to be leaders through social justice initiatives by being at the forefront of efforts for the safety and inclusion of the transgender community. The participants also indicated that school principals must make opportunities available for transgender students to learn about gender as it relates to their personal gender identity and gender expression. These students felt that once they learned more about themselves in the context of the communities in which they exist, combined with the leadership and public support of their school principal, their high school community could be a fair, more inclusive and healthy environment.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Recommendations and Conclusion**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this case study was to investigate the primary research question:

- What are the principal leadership practices that positively impact transgender youth in school?

Conclusions from this study are relevant for school principals who are interested in developing their leadership capacity so that all students will have access to programming and support for learning that promotes their success, inclusive of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups or individuals. In this particular research study, the experiences of transgender students in an urban high school provided the case for consideration. Findings from this study focused on the leadership behaviours of the school principal and the impacts these behaviours have had for transgender students in the school. The results from this study will afford new insights regarding the principal leadership practices that impact marginalized, vulnerable students within a school population. Two additional questions assisted in answering the primary research question.

- How do transgender youth experience various principal leadership practices?
- How can the implementation of policy by a school principal be best facilitated so that the targeted group experiences the intended benefits for which the policy was created?

The conclusions of this study have arisen from the primary research question and the two secondary research questions. Data collected from semi-structure interviews with six student

study participants was analysed and interpreted using the lens of the conceptual framework and the research literature.

This case study aimed to determine which school leadership practices positively impact transgender youth. Understanding the lived experience of an identified marginalized, vulnerable group in school who have been impacted by school administrators' actions and inactions, offered valuable insight into the relationship between the practice of school leadership and its impact upon that group.

A discussion of the major findings and conclusions drawn from the research are presented followed by recommendations stemming from the research. My final reflections conclude this chapter.

## **The Findings**

The findings of this case study research resulted from the six student study participants sharing their experiences as transgender students in high school. Student experiences as communicated in the study findings were very similar across all participants. The participants were very forthcoming in sharing their experiences as they appeared to be optimistic that the opportunity to have their voice acknowledged would lead to a greater awareness of the circumstances of the transgender community in high school and result in a more caring, supportive and inclusive experience for all students in the future and specifically for high school students identifying as transgender. The main findings are as follows:

1. All study participants indicated that their school experience exposed them to consistent bullying, harassment and violence that was daily, consistent and pervasive in their school experiences. The participants indicated that these experiences lead anxiety and depression, contributed to absenteeism from school and other social

- activity, impacted their academic success in school and influenced decisions to transfer to multiple high school programs. [Finding 1.1]
2. All study participants disclosed school experiences in which the school principal was witness to, was aware of, or participated in situations where bullying, harassment and violence had occurred and failed to intervene on behalf of the victim. [Finding 1.2]
  3. Although there was not a research question directly related to washroom use, all participants made comments regarding this in their interview. The participants recognized washroom use as a concern that brings to the forefront the complexities of the issues that face transgender students in high school on a daily basis. Issues of personal safety, recognition, awareness, acceptance, and inclusion of the transgender student community and the support of students, staff and school leadership are aspects of this discussion and therefore elevate the issue of washroom use for the transgender student community. [Finding 1.3]
  4. All study participants indicated that many issues related to being a student in high school, including issues of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, physical health, mental health and learning, were ignored because professionals within their school, including the school principal, tended to treat any issue as related to gender identity and gender expression. [Finding 1.4]
  5. Study participants had a limited awareness or ability to participate in the development, interpretation, implementation or enactment of government or school policy directed specifically to support of the transgender student community in this school. As a result, policy created to support a specific marginalized vulnerable



- population at the school site, such as the transgender student community, may not have the significant positive impact as was envisioned by its creators. [Finding 2.1]
6. All study participants indicated that school principals must support all students within the school environment. School principal leaders must understand and address issues of equity and justice for all students. The school principal is seen as essential in reinforcing and communicating expectations, as well as in role-modeling the relationships, attitudes and behaviors that support all students. [Finding 3.1]
  7. Study participants indicated that school principals must support the transgender student community by providing opportunities for transgender youth to understand and explore the concepts of gender identity and gender expression. The participants indicated that for a significant period of their lives they were confused about their own identity and therefore were unavailable to the communities in which they existed, including school. They also indicated that if healthy, appropriate information was made available regarding the potential diversity that exists within a school community then the confusion and shame experienced by transgender students could be erased and replaced with a far healthier confident image of themselves. [Finding 3.2]
  8. All study participants shared a very empathetic, optimistic view that if school principal leaders were aware and knowledgeable regarding the transgender student community and shared this awareness with school staff and students, schools would be a much safer, caring, supportive and inclusive environment. The participants indicated that they felt principals were obligated to provide opportunities for staff and

students to understand and explore the concepts of gender identity and gender expression. [Finding 3.3]

9. An assumption of this study was that transgender youth in school may not have experiences of principal leadership practices that they identified as having a positive impact. In the absence of lived experiences of principal practices that have a positive impact on the transgender student community identifying role models in society, media might identify which practices principal leaders might adopt to support transgender students. Study participants were unable to identify role models that supported the transgender community, but recognized the importance of the media in terms of society's awareness and understanding or issues significant to the transgender community. [Finding 3.4]

### **Implications for Practice**

Given that the “out” student transgender community in schools is relatively new, there is limited longitudinal research and understanding regarding their experiences in North American schools. However, anecdotal data and survey data confirm that transgender students in school face discrimination, violence, bullying, exclusion, reduced achievement levels and significant school disruption (GLSEN, 2009). This case study confirms this reality for the small group of student study participants in one large urban high school. Although a very small study, I hope that the findings support principal practice changes and that this study supports others to endeavour to understand and make positive changes to the circumstances faced by the transgender community in high school. The six study participants were positively impacted as by virtue of this study through the sharing and documentation of their stories, their personal

existence and that of the transgender student community within the high school where this study took place were validated.

This research study revealed that transgender students in high school have minimal experiences of principal practices that support a positive school experience for them. The transgender students in this study also had difficulty identifying positive role models in today's society that would support a vision of what school principal leadership might look like. The participants did, however, identify attitudes and behaviors they felt were necessary for principal leaders to support the transgender student community. Students indicated that school principals must be advocates for the safe, caring and supportive treatment of all students. This principal leadership cannot be one of convenience or comfort but will require a commitment to all students, reflective of the research literature regarding social justice leadership.

Study participants identified the importance of principal leaders to cultivate relationships with students as a means to promote student voice within the school environment. Knowledge acquisition and knowledge creation (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006) are identified by students as key components of these relationships. The participants indicated that school principals must make information regarding the transgender community accessible to all students. Access to information through curricular study, guest speakers, school library resources and school activities as well as access to the LGBTQ2+ community was regarded by transgender students as having a significant capacity to influence acceptance, inclusion and ultimately the celebration of diversity within the school community (Terrell & Lindsey, 2009).

## **Recommendations**

Recommendations based on the findings, analysis and conclusions of this study are:

1. School principal leaders are obligated to ensure that all youth enjoy their right to education in an environment where they are protected from discrimination, harassment, bullying and violence. Principal leaders must display the beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that support equity for all student groups. As discussed in the literature review and made evident in the data, the momentum of the status quo and the obstructive attitudes and beliefs that exist within society offer an enormous, never ceasing and often an overwhelming resistant force to the equity and social agendas of the work of principal leaders. While the research literature and student study participant data reveal there is reason for optimism and hope, there continues to be social, political and economic influences that are cause for concern that the path ahead will continue to require significant efforts from principal leaders.
2. Principal leaders must develop a fluency in how structural forces perpetuate uneven outcomes for historically marginalized, vulnerable students. Principal leaders cannot be expected to lead reform initiatives alongside students if they do not have the skill set to recognize the societal and institutional factors that reproduce the inequities that exist for marginalized, vulnerable student communities. Historically, educational leadership training has engaged and encouraged traditional definitions of leadership and roles of a school principal leader (Carpenter & Brewer, 2012; Cobb, Weiner, & Gonzales, 2017; Newcomb & Cumings Mansfield, 2014). These emphases are reflected in how leadership preparation programs are designed, curriculum for these programs selected, and instructional strategies are used in university classrooms. Coursework and professional standards for principal leaders must reflect a school

- principal leader's role as a justice advocate and democratic change maker reflective of the literature and research on social justice leadership.
3. School principal leaders must prioritize student voice to disrupt traditional notions of schooling and develop more inclusive environments for the caring, support, development and success of all learners, specifically those student populations historically left most marginalized and vulnerable. School principal leaders must develop the relationships and processes that support all students in sharing their voices and having what students shared reflected in the operation of the school. Accessing and incorporating student voice allows for student interests, identities and experiences to be central considerations within the environment and culture of the school community and promotes multiple forms of diversity to be reflected. Schools cannot establish equitable school outcomes for all students when school principal leaders deny the voices of historically marginalized, vulnerable student groups (Cumings Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012). McCormick, Schmidt and Clifton (2015) suggested that marginalized, vulnerable communities are fully capable of offering insight into the solutions to many of the problems and structures that maintain their oppression. Empowerment theory (McCormick et al., 2014) requires that the voices of those individuals most marginalized and vulnerable are central considerations in actions moving forward.
  4. Policy development, interpretation, implementation and enactment must incorporate the voices of individuals most impacted at all stages. Transgender youth in high school are experts in their own experiences and therefore are those most capable to comment on these experiences. Non-discriminatory and antibullying policies which

clearly articulate identified populations must be ensured. District boards and schools must have clear non-discrimination policies and explicit codes of conduct that strictly prohibit harassment, discrimination and bullying on the basis of a student's actual or perceived membership in the LGBTQ2+ community. Protection from violence, harassment and bullying is an essential component in securing other individual rights. Violence, harassment and bullying against the LGBTQ2+ community is a violation of their right to physical integrity. Additionally, the violence, harassment and bullying may deprive them of the right to an education on equal terms as their peers. As communicated by the study participants, violence, harassment and bullying have a significant impact on their mental health, academic success and their overall sense of wellbeing. As well as addressing issues of violence, harassment, discrimination and bullying perpetrated against the transgender student community, board and school policy should address issues of privacy and confidentiality, use of names and pronouns, records and communication, gender-based activities, and school dress codes. Policy should also address change room/wash room access and accommodations.

5. Schools play a significant role in society in ensuring students have the freedom to seek, access, receive, and impart information. This includes the ability of a student to have access to information about the LGBTQ2+ population, specifically as it pertains to this study the transgender community. Schools can provide students access to information about gender identity by including gender related topics in the curriculum, by making information available in school libraries, and by partnering with outside community organizations that support gender diversity.

6. Current literature and the findings of this study paint a dismal picture of the current school experiences of the “out” transgender student community in high school. Given that this community is relatively new in terms of being ‘out’ in schools, there is little research data that tracks changes in school principal leadership practices and the impacts of these changes on the school experiences of this student community. School leadership, school staff and the student community must support the transgender student community in high schools by using findings from this study as well as other literature and research on the subject. Longitudinal data that incorporate data from a larger study sample, across a larger cross section of schools would further support our understanding of which actions and inactions by a school principal positively impact the experiences of an identified marginalized, vulnerable student population, the transgender student population in high school.

Although all student study participants attended this high school, the case study provided for students the opportunity to reflect on their school experiences throughout their school careers, however throughout the interview student study participants referenced their current school a number of times. As a result, I have some observations and therefore recommendations I would offer the school. Student study participants seemed satisfied with the school in making available the GSA group. Students appeared to evaluate the school as having an emerging understanding of the needs of transgender students. Student study participants indicated that there were a number of teachers and one assistant principal in particular that were significant support and allies within the school community. It would be important that these staff members support and lead school initiatives concerning equity and social justice for transgender youth within the school. Reflecting on the findings of this study providing curricular, non-

curricular, library and other resources accessible to students that support a healthy understanding of the gender identity and gender expression continuum is important. Many student study participants indicated that they felt a great deal of misunderstanding and therefore exclusion resulted from a limited amount of exposure and knowledge in regard to gender diversity and gender expression. Lastly, although legislation and policy are often dictated from outside of the school program by governments and school boards how it is enacted within the context of the school is site based. I would encourage as an aspect of making available resources to students that legislation and policy directed in support of a specific population are included in this. It is important that students are aware of the legislation and policy and have opportunities to offer insight into how the enactment of these impact their school experiences.

## **Conclusion**

This study has been invaluable in gaining a deeper understanding of how the transgender student community experiences school leadership. The responses collected from six research study participants were consistent among the participants and with the research literature. Although the data gained from the participants and the research literature supported that the transgender community in high school is subject to significant levels of violence, harassment and bullying with very detrimental impacts on physical health, mental health and overall academic success, all participants identified opportunities for this experience to be different for themselves and for transgender students in the future.

The empathy, optimism and hope communicated to the researcher by the study participants was humbling. Students are the experts in their own experiences. No different than all students, the study participants have a voice that is thoughtful, wise and informative. School leaders must access this student voice and acknowledge through action that that voice is valued.



Clearly, action is necessary to be inclusive of all students, where diversity is recognized as a strength within our school communities and the greater communities in which our schools exist.

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## WERKLUND SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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### Appendix A

#### Information Letter

February 01, 2017

Xxxxx  
Xxxxx  
Xxxxx  
Xxxxx

#### **Re: School Leadership for Transgender Students: A Case Study**

Dear Mx. Xxxxxx:

You are receiving this letter in request of your participation in a university research project on the topic of School Leadership for Transgender Students. I am conducting this research as part of the dissertation requirements for completion of an EdD Degree in the Department of Graduate Studies, Faculty of Education at the University of Calgary. The purpose of this case study is to investigate how the actions and/or inactions of a school principal impact the lived experiences of transgender students in school.

Specifically, I would like to have the opportunity to interview transgender students in regard to their past school experiences. This would consist of one interview with the student, with a possibility for some follow-up beyond that. Notes will be taken and the interview will have audio recording to capture the interview dialogue. This interview would be approximately one hour in length and would focus on how the actions and/or inactions of the school principal historically have impacted the school experience of a transgender student. If you are willing to participate, I will send more detailed information about the project and can determine a mutually agreeable time for the interview.

You are under no obligation to participate. If you do consent to participate, you may decide without consequence at any time not to continue your involvement or refuse to answer questions in the interview. If you decide to withdraw your participation after the interview, any data collected from you will not be considered in the study results and will immediately be destroyed. Additionally, once interviews have been completed and

transcribed, research participants will have the opportunity to review the interview transcripts, and can make additions, corrections or deletions. Research participants will be informed when data analysis commences as this will be the last opportunity for participants to withdraw from the study. At any point in the study research participants are free to ask questions in regard to the research study and their involvement in it.

Data collected for this research study will be kept in stored in a secure location to which only the researcher has access. All data will remain strictly confidential. All names will be removed from any data to be shared in the study findings securing the anonymity of research participants. Interview notes and digital audio recordings will be retained in a locked filing cabinet until the conclusion of the study and the publishing of findings. A final copy of the dissertation will be available upon request.

This study is subject to approval through the Research and Innovation Department of the Calgary Board of Education and the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board of the University of Calgary. Please feel free to contact me at 403-777-\*\*\*\* or email me at [bdbarbor@cbe.ab.ca](mailto:bdbarbor@cbe.ab.ca) if you have any questions. You may contact my research supervisor, Dr. Sharon L. Friesen, at 403-220-\*\*\*\*.

Please complete and return the attached consent form indicating your decision to participate in this research study. Thank you for considering this request. I am very interested in learning about your school experiences as impacted by school leadership practices. Thank you in advance for your interest, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Don Barbor, EdD Candidate



## **Appendix B**

### **Participant Assent**

Name of Researcher: Mr. Don Barbor

Department: Faculty of Graduate Studies, Education

Telephone & Email: 403-801-xxxx, barrie.barbor@ucalgary.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Sharon L. Friesen

Title of Project: School Leadership for Transgender Students: A Case Study

This Assent Form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed assent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study is to investigate to determine which school leadership practices positively impact transgender youth. Understanding the lived experience of an identified marginalized vulnerable group in school, who have been impacted by school administrator's actions or inactions, will act as a window into the relationship between the practice of school leadership and its impact upon a targeted marginalized group in public schools: the transgender student community.

### **What will you be asked to do?**

The researcher would like to have the opportunity to engage with study participants in an individual interview. There will be one interview, with a possibility for some follow-up beyond that. Participation in the follow-up is completely voluntary.

The researcher, Don Barbor, will be taking notes and using a digital audio recorder to capture the interview. We would meet for approximately 45 minutes to one hour to discuss your experiences in previous school environments in regard to those actions that school leaders made that supported your success within the school community and those that did not.

Only the researcher, Don Barbor, will have access to the interview notes and the recordings. The information provided will be kept confidential. Study participants will be provided an opportunity to review interviews transcripts and interpretations to check them for accuracy, edits and to provide feedback.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you do assent to participate, you may without consequence, decide not to continue your involvement or to refuse to answer any questions.

If study participants decide to withdraw their participation after the interview, any data collected from individuals will be withdrawn from the study. Additionally, once interviews are completed and transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and, if they choose, make additions, corrections, or deletions to the record of the things they have said. Study participants will have the right to withdraw their participation no later than the beginning of the analysis of the data collected. Further, at any point, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it. Most importantly, at no time will you be judged or evaluated, and will at no time be at risk of harm as a result of your participation.

### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Should you agree to participate, you will be asked some demographic questions in regard to age, grade, and gender identity. A complete list of the questions that will be asked in the interviews is provided at the end of this assent form.

The data, once collected will be transcribed by the researcher. The recordings will never be played in public. Transcripts will be edited for speech ticks, grammar, repeated words, etc. to support the smooth reading of interviews and not to alter content.

All research participants' information will remain confidential. However you may be referred in the data using a pseudonym. If you have a pseudonym of preference you can identify this as the end of this form.

### **Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

There is no anticipated harm or predictable risks associated with participating in this research project. This study is not considered 'high-risk'.

### **What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

Only the researcher, Don Barbor, will have access to the interview notes and the recordings. The information provided will be kept confidential. Participants will be provided a copy of the interview transcripts and interpretations to check them for accuracy, edits and to provide feedback.

The data gathered in the study will be kept in strict confidence, and will be stored at a secure location, to which only the researcher Don Barbor will have access. Further, he will

retain the interview notes and digital audio recordings locked in a secure cabinet until the study is completed and the dissertation exam is performed, after which time they will be destroyed in a manner that safeguards privacy and confidentiality. A final copy of the dissertation can be made available to you if requested.

### **Signatures**

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project no later than the beginning of the analysis of the data collection. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Questions/Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Dr. Sharon L. Friesen (Supervisor)  
403-220-xxxx [sfriesen@ucalgary.ca](mailto:sfriesen@ucalgary.ca)

Or

Mr. Don Barbor  
403-801-xxxx [barrie.barbor@ucalgary.ca](mailto:barrie.barbor@ucalgary.ca)

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact an Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-6289/220-4283;  
[cfreb@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cfreb@ucalgary.ca)

A copy of this assent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.  
The researcher has kept a copy of the assent form.

## **Appendix C**

### **Participant Consent Form**

Name of Researcher: Mr. Don Barbor

Department: Faculty of Graduate Studies, Education

Telephone & Email: 403-801-xxxx, barrie.barbor@ucalgary.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Sharon L. Friesen

Title of Project: School Leadership for Transgender Students: A Case Study

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information. The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study is to investigate to determine which school leadership practices positively impact transgender youth. Understanding the lived experience of an identified marginalized vulnerable group in school, who have been impacted by school administrator's actions or inactions, will act as a window into the relationship between the practice of school leadership and its impact upon a targeted marginalized group in public schools: the transgender student community.

### **What will you be asked to do?**

The researcher would like to have the opportunity to engage with your student in an individual interview. There will be one interview, with a possibility for some follow-up beyond that. Participation in the follow-up is completely voluntary.

The researcher, Don Barbor, will be taking notes and using a digital audio recorder to capture the interview. We would meet for approximately 45 minutes to one hour to discuss your experiences in previous schools in regard to those actions that school leaders made that supported your success within the school community and those that did not.

Only the researcher, Don Barbor, will have access to the interview notes and the recordings. The information provided will be kept confidential. Participants will be provided an opportunity to review interviews transcripts and interpretations to check them for accuracy, edits and to provide feedback.

You are under no obligation to have your student to participate in this study. If you do consent to participate, you may without consequence, decide not to continue your involvement or to refuse to answer any questions.

If you decide to withdraw your student's participation after the interview, any data collected from you will be withdrawn from the study. Additionally, once interviews are completed and transcribed, you will have the opportunity to review the interview transcripts and, if you choose, make additions, corrections, or deletions to the record of the things that were said. You will then have the right to withdraw your student's no later than the beginning of the analysis of the data collected. Further, at any point, you are free to ask any questions about the research and your involvement with it. Most importantly, at no time will your student be judged or evaluated, and will at no time be at risk of harm as a result of your participation.

### **What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

Should you agree to have your student participate, they will be asked some demographic questions in regard to age, grade, and gender identity. A complete list of the questions that will be asked in the interviews is provided at the end of this consent form.

The data, once collected will be transcribed by the researcher. The recordings will never be played in public. Transcripts will be edited for speech ticks, grammar, repeated words, etc. to support the smooth reading of interviews and not to alter content.

All research participants' information will remain confidential. However your student may be referred in the data using a pseudonym.

### **Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

There is no anticipated harm or predictable risks associated with participating in this research project. This study is not considered 'high-risk'.

### **What Happens to the Information I Provide?**

Only the researcher, Don Barbor, will have access to the interview notes and the recordings. The information provided will be kept confidential. Participants will be provided a copy of the interview transcripts and interpretations to check them for accuracy, edits and to provide feedback.

The data gathered in the study will be kept in strict confidence, and will be stored at a secure location, to which only the researcher Don Barbor will have access. Further, he will retain the interview notes and digital audio recordings locked in a secure cabinet until the

study is completed and the dissertation exam is performed, after which time they will be destroyed in a manner that safeguards privacy and confidentiality. A final copy of the dissertation can be made available to you if requested.

### **Signatures**

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your student's participation in this research project, and 2) you agree have your student participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project no later than the beginning of the analysis of the data collection. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Student Participant's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Parent Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Name: (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Questions/Concerns**

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Dr. Sharon L. Friesen (Supervisor)  
403-220-xxxx [sfriesen@ucalgary.ca](mailto:sfriesen@ucalgary.ca)

Or

Mr. Don Barbor  
403-801-xxxx [barrie.barbor@ucalgary.ca](mailto:barrie.barbor@ucalgary.ca)

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact an Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 220-6289/220-4283;  
[cfreb@ucalgary.ca](mailto:cfreb@ucalgary.ca)

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.  
The research

## **Appendix D - Formal Interview Questions**

### **School Leadership for Marginalized Student Populations: A Case Study**

#### **Student Study Participant Questions – Feb. 2018**

**Participant** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date** \_\_\_\_\_ **Start** \_\_\_\_\_ **End** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Interview Procedure**

The following questions have been designed to guide this 45 minute to an hour conversation. Questions are open-ended to offer freedom in your response. This interview will be audio-recorded. I will be taking notes during the interview. You may see these notes at the end of the interview if you wish. You can stop the interview or request clarification at any time.

#### **General Opening Questions**

- 1) Gender Identity \_\_\_\_\_ preferred pronoun \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) Current Grade \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) Predicted Year of Graduation \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) # of High School Attended \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Research Study Questions**

The following are the broad research study questions that will be informed by your responses to the Formal Interview questions.

1. How do transgender youth experience various principal leadership practices?
2. How can the implementation of policy by a school principal be best facilitated, so that the targeted group experiences the intended benefits for which the policy was created?
3. What are the principal leadership practices that positively impact transgender youth in school?

#### **Formal interview Questions**

- 1) Tell me about your experiences in “coming out” at school? How was this experience impacted by school administration?
- 2) In your experience what are the common misperceptions about trans students in high school? What was your experience with these misperceptions? What do you think school administration could do to reduce misconceptions that exist for trans students?
- 3) What is your most memorable school experience? Why is this significant?

- 4) Are you aware of Bill 10, An Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014); and by the associated Guidelines for Best Practice: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions (Alberta Education, 2016)? How have these documents impacted your school experience?
- 5) Are there appropriate examples in today's culture that school administration can reference and examine as examples of practices that are thoughtful, respectful and inclusive of the high school trans community?
- 6) As a high school student that has identified as a member of the trans community what would you suggest as required changes that high school administration must consider to create a safe, supportive, healthy, rigorous and inclusive school environment?

### **Concluding Question**

Do you have any additional comments that you would like to share related to your school experience and this research study's purpose of identifying those actions or inactions of school principals impact on the trans community experience in high school?



## Appendix E – Interview Protocol

### School Leadership for Marginalised Students: A Case Study

Participant Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Interview Start : \_\_\_\_\_ End: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Interview Procedure

The following questions have been designed to guide this 45 minute to an hour conversation. Questions are open-ended to offer freedom in your response. This interview will be audio-recorded. I will be taking notes during the interview. You may see these notes at the end of the interview if you wish. You can stop the interview or request clarification at any time.

Question	Answer	Notes
Gender Identity		
Preferred Pronouns		
Grade		
Predicted Year of Graduation		
# of High Schools attended		

#### Description of Research Study

The purpose of this case study is to investigate to determine which school leadership practices positively impact transgender youth. Understanding the lived experience of an identified marginalized vulnerable group in school, who have been impacted by school administrator's actions or inactions, will act as a window into the relationship between the practice of school leadership and its impact upon a targeted marginalized group in public schools: the transgender student community.

Six students have been selected to participate in this research study. Remind student research participants that they are under no obligation to participate and, if they do consent to participate, they may, without consequence, decide to withdraw from the study entirely or not answer specific questions. All data collected from student research participants that opt to withdraw will be destroyed via a secure shredding service and all audio recordings will be erased. Student study participants have the right to withdraw from the study no later than the beginning of the analysis of the data. At any point student research participants are free to ask any questions about the research study and their participation with it. Most importantly, though out the research study participants will be respected, never judge or evaluated and their safety considered first and foremost. Additionally, data gathered in this study will be kept in strict confidence, and stored in a secure location to which only I will have access. Study data once collected from participant interviews will be transcribed. These transcriptions will be edited for speech ticks, grammar, repeated words, etc. so that the transcript flows more easily (not for content).

Thank you for your participation today. This interview should take approximately 45 minutes.

*Turn on recorder at this time*

Question	Answer/Notes
Tell me about your experiences in “coming out” at school? How was this experience impacted by school administration?	
In your experience what are the common misperceptions about trans students in high school? What was your experience with these misperceptions? What do you think school administration could do to reduce misconceptions that exist for trans students?	
What is you most memorable school experience? Why is this significant?	
Are you aware of Bill 10, An Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014); and by the associated Guidelines for Best Practice: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions (Alberta Education, 2016)? How have these documents impacted your school experience?	
Are there appropriate examples in today’s culture that school administration can reference and examine as examples of practices that are thoughtful, respectful and inclusive of the high school trans community?	
As a high school student that has identified as a member of the trans community what would you suggest as required changes that high school administration must consider to create a safe, supportive, healthy, rigorous and inclusive school environment?	
Are there any additional comments that you would like to share related to your school experience and this research project’s purpose of identifying those actions or inactions of school principals impact on the trans community in high school?	

Thank you for your participation in this research study. I want to assure you of the confidentiality of this research and the protection of your anonymity. Do you have any questions, concerns or comments at this time? You are reminded that you may contact myself or the research supervisor at any time by email for follow up information or to ask further questions related to this research study. I want to thank you once again and remind you that your participation is voluntary and you continue to have the right to withdraw from the study right up until the data analysis begins.