Interrupting Institutional Heteronormativity: School Counsellors' Role in Advocating for Gender and Sexually Diverse Students
Mettre fin à l'hétéronormativité institutionnelle : le rôle des conseillers en milieu scolaire dans la promotion de la diversité de genre et de sexe chez les étudiants

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ABSTRACT

Many gender and sexually diverse students continue to view their schools as a hostile and oppressive environment. The focus in research has shifted more recently from individualizing this problem to understanding the complex systemic and institutional contributors to the ongoing marginalization of this population. As an integral part of the school system, school counsellors are uniquely positioned to offer important individual- and group-level supports to these students. Using narrative interviewing, this qualitative study provides an opportunity to visit the lived experiences of 6 current gender and sexually diverse high school students and their encounters with heteronormativity at school. Their stories offer insights into factors contributing to their distress and demonstrate stress-ameliorating factors that could be used to guide school counsellors who advocate for the safety and inclusion of students with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.

RÉSUMÉ

Bon nombre d'étudiants et d'étudiantes issus de la diversité de genre et de sexe continuent de percevoir leurs écoles comme des milieux hostiles et oppressifs. La recherche a changé de cap récemment, passant d'une approche centrée sur l'individualisation du problème à une meilleure compréhension des complexes éléments systémiques et institutionnels qui contribuent à la marginalisation de cette population. Faisant intégralement partie du système scolaire, les conseillers et conseillères en milieu scolaire occupent une position stratégique leur permettant d'offrir à ces étudiantes et étudiants des soutiens individuels et collectifs. Fondée sur des entrevues narratives, cette étude qualitative permet d'aborder les expériences vécues de 6 étudiants et étudiantes du secondaire actuellement issus de la diversité de genre et de sexe et leurs contacts avec l'hétéronormativité en milieu scolaire. Leurs narrations offrent un aperçu des facteurs qui contribuent à leur détresse et démontrent des facteurs susceptibles de réduire leurs niveaux de stress et auxquels on pourrait recourir pour guider les conseillers et conseillères en milieu scolaire qui réclament plus de sécurité et d'inclusion à l'égard des étudiantes et étudiants ayant diverses orientations et identités sexuelles.

On March 19, 2015, a modification was made to Bill 10, the Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children, which made it mandatory that

requests by students in Alberta to form a gay-straight alliance (GSA) at school be granted (Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2014). In response to this amendment, John Carpay, lawyer and president of the Justice Centre for Constitutional Freedoms, stated:

> Though bullying is a problem that targets children by class, race, weight, appearance, sexual orientation, geography, and intelligence, nobody has ever seriously suggested rich-poor, fat-thin, ugly-attractive, or stupid-smart alliances as a solution to bullying, because such clubs would not address the root causes of bullying. (Carpay, 2015, p. 1)

What Carpay was addressing is the reality that, on the surface, this amendment resembled a win for gender- and sexually-diverse students. However, this revision did not address the actual root of homophobia and transphobia in schools: institutional heteronormativity.

Heteronormativity refers to the privileging of cisgender heterosexual male, masculine men pairing with cisgender heterosexual female, feminine women. Behind heteronormativity is the idea that there is an "ideal" configuration of sex, gender, and sexuality (Bryan, 2014). Heterosexuality is privileged based on the assumption that heterosexual power and privilege are normal and ideal, and that these assumptions set the standard for legitimacy and authenticity (Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Ngo, 2003; Yep, 2003). Heteronormativity also upholds the belief that there is one ideal form of male and female, thereby supporting a gender binary and privileging the expression of "true" masculinity and femininity.

Heteronormativity fosters systemic disadvantages for gender- and sexually-diverse students because it confers all social and cultural advantages to heterosexuals and gender-conforming individuals (Nunn & Bolt, 2015). *Privilege* is the outcome of the advantages that are ascribed to some members of society based on dominant group membership to social positions that hold institutional power (Kimmel & Ferber, 2016; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Heterosexual and cisgender identities hold systemic power, and individuals who belong to these groups receive unearned privileges, which are not provided to individuals with minority gender and sexual identities, simply based on their dominant group membership. This leaves gender- and sexually-diverse students subjected to *minority stress*, the chronic stress related to the stigmatization of their gender identity and sexuality, which results in elevations in mental health outcomes (Meyer, 1995).

Several education scholars have commented on schools' role in perpetuating the belief that heterosexuality is the only "normal" and viable option (Kehily, 2002; Kosciw, Greytak, & Bartkiewicz, 2014). For instance, Kedley (2015) asserted that classrooms reflect, contribute to, and endorse the normative sex, gender, and sexuality categories through the school culture, rules, and rituals. To interrupt this system of oppression, GSAs have become important sources of support as spaces promoting the inclusion of this population.

A number of scholars have remarked on the importance of GSAs and their role in providing opportunities for social support (Lee, 2002), contributing to a

reduction in symptoms of emotional distress (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011), promoting school attachment (Peter, Taylor, Ristock, & Edkins, 2015), and supporting students' experiences of school as a supportive place (Taylor et al., 2011). The research continues to support the role of GSAs as a resource for students who identify as gender- and sexually-diverse, as well as promote an attitude of appreciation of diversity for the entire student body (Deming, Soule, Poulsen, & Walker, 2014). However, Robles-Fernandez (2014) found that while GSAs have the potential to help gender- and sexually-diverse youth, students who attend GSAs continue to feel marginalized as the "other," feeling alienated from heteronormative standards. GSAs allow for connection and normalization but they do not address the predominant beliefs and values which sustain and normalize bullying as part of the culture of the school (Carlson, 2014). Thus, GSAs alone do not represent the entire solution to addressing institutional oppression operating in schools based on gender identity and sexual orientation.

Situated from a position of advocacy and having the opportunity to work with individual students, school counsellors are an important resource and play an integral role in understanding how heteronormativity is experienced by gender- and sexually-diverse youth. School counsellors typically have strong connections within the school community which allow them to provide meaningful and informed support, advocacy, and resources to promote the safety and well-being of this vulnerable population of students.

The purpose of this study was to explore how students experience heteronormativity at school and the resulting impact on their well-being. Through their stories, opportunities for school counsellors to interrupt and intervene in the routine oppression of these students, and to advocate for a safer and more inclusive school experience for gender- and sexually-diverse youth, are illuminated. While heteronormativity is maintained at a systemic level, a deeper understanding of the experiences of gender- and sexually-diverse students at an individual level can equip school counsellors with tools to identify oppressive practices in their schools and offer individual and school-wide advocacy and support to promote the inclusion and safety of these students.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION CONCERNING
GENDER- AND SEXUALLY-DIVERSE INDIVIDUALS

Flinders, Noddings, and Thornton (1986) asserted that the school curriculum is intimately concerned not only with the nature of learning but also the nature of values and beliefs. Tyler (1949) referred to the school as a social institution whose purpose was to help children obtain a philosophy on life that supports socially significant behaviour patterns. Informally, students learn about the values and norms of their school culture through peer socialization and interactions with school authorities (Walton, 2005). Given that students spend more hours at school than in any other setting during their critical developmental years, schools have a profound impact on the people they become.

The public-school curriculum, however, maintains a dominant heteronormative bias through limited or non-existent classroom discussions and curriculum content that is inclusive of issues about gender- and sexually-diverse individuals (Depoian, 2009). As Sumara and Davis (2013) identified, to live within a heteronormative curriculum means learning to "see straight, to read straight, and to think straight" (p. 324). Kedley (2015) asserted that classrooms reflect, contribute to, and endorse normative sex, gender, and sexuality categories through school culture, rules, and rituals. Mufioz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds (2002) referred to the classroom as "the most homophobic of all social institutions" (p. 53).

There have been a few initiatives taken in the past two decades pertaining to upholding more equitable treatment of Canadian gender- and sexually-diverse students such as *Every Class in Every School* (Taylor et al., 2011) and *Being Safe Being Me* (Veale et al., 2015), two national surveys of Canadian students' experiences. Both revealed a pervasive and enduring pattern showing that gender- and sexually-diverse students experience their schools as unsafe.

It is uncontested that gender- and sexually-diverse students in Canada continue to experience extreme harassment and bullying at school and, despite the increase in school resources and an awareness of gender- and sexually-diverse students, schools remain hostile places (Grace, 2006; Peter et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2011; Veale et al., 2015). Regarding sexually-diverse students, Taylor et al. (2011) found more than 20% had been physically harassed or assaulted, more than 40% had been sexually harassed, more than 50% had been verbally harassed, and almost two-thirds reported feeling unsafe at school. Concerning gender-diverse youth, more than 70% reported experiencing verbal harassment, nearly 40% reported experiencing physical harassment, and almost 50% had been sexually harassed in the past year (Taylor et al., 2011). This ongoing oppression is becoming understood as a result of systemic maintenance of normative discourses around gender and sexuality, which normalize and even promote intolerance towards gender- and sexually-diverse students (Clark & Blackburn, 2009; Dinkins & Englert, 2015; Kedley, 2015; Taylor et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2011; Veale et al., 2015).

Young (1990) defined violence as a social practice, which is less about particular acts and more about the social context that surrounds them. School environments have the potential to breed, enable, perpetuate, or even encourage bullying behaviours against gender- and sexually-diverse students due to institutional socialization, which normalizes universal heteronormativity (Callaghan, 2009, 2016; Connell & Elliott, 2009; Leonardi & Saenz, 2014; Walton, 2005). Anyone who is perceived as falling outside these normative constructs of sexuality and gender, regardless of their actual sexual orientation or gender identity, is subject to violence, discrimination, and marginalization (Leonardi & Saenz, 2014; Taylor et al., 2011).

Gender- and sexually-diverse students experience oppression beyond physical harassment and verbal abuse. Routine microaggressions are experienced by gender- and sexually-diverse students, which become a part of the normative social fabric and order. Taylor et al. (2011) affirmed that more than 70% of all

students reported hearing homophobic and transphobic comments regularly at school. Miller and Gilligan (2014) asserted that microaggressions operate at the overt (i.e., name-calling and harassment) and the hidden level (i.e., only teaching about heterosexual sexuality, excluding curriculum materials written by or about sexual and gender minorities, lack of resources, support services, or GSAs). These microaggressions compromise the safety of the school environment and are symptomatic of the gap in support for students in school policy, curriculum materials, and support services (Leonardi & Saenz, 2014; Miller & Gilligan, 2014).

Counsellors in schools are uniquely positioned as mental health professionals to provide free individual and group support and liaison services for students and families. They are also an important support to teachers, administrators, and school staff to access information and resources related to important topics impacting the emotional well-being of students. The most recent national survey of gender- and sexually-diverse students in Canada (i.e., *Every Class in Every School*) found that roughly 60% of gender- and sexually-diverse students, and half of the students with gender- or sexually-diverse parents, felt comfortable talking to the school counsellor about matters pertaining to gender and sexuality (Taylor et al., 2011). While this suggests many students who identify as gender- and sexually-diverse would be comfortable accessing support by their school counsellor, this result also highlights that a high number of students are missing out on an important resource to provide support in the face of minority stress. This finding opens a window of possibility around bridging this gap and making these services more accessible and supportive for this population of students.

Possibly contributing to students' lack of comfort when discussing topics pertaining to gender and sexuality with their school counsellors, previous research highlights that most school counsellors receive little to no direct graduate training or professional development around supporting gender- and sexually-diverse students (Alderson, Orzeck, & McEwen, 2009; Kull, Kosciw, & Greytak, 2016). This places the responsibility on individual practitioners to seek out training and professional development to build their competency to support this demographic of students ethically. The results contained in this paper aim to support school counsellors in building their competence through understanding the experiences of gender- and sexually-diverse students in schools and to provide opportunities for interrupting systemic practices which marginalize and oppress this group of students.

METHODS

This study was a multi-method qualitative inquiry involving narrative interviewing with secondary students, and critical discourse analysis of core health literacy curriculum materials around gender and sexuality (Surette, 2019). This paper focused on narrative interview analysis as it related to factors contributing to student distress, as well as factors that protect student wellness. Narrative inquiry, which considers experience to be the fundamental ontological category from which

all inquiry proceeds, was employed for this study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). This study was primarily concerned with capturing the lived experiences of students as they pertained to heterosexism at school. From a narrative perspective, lived experiences are the ultimate source of validation for knowledge (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007), and are explored here to visit the stories of gender and sexual minority youth currently navigating heteronormative school spaces.

Data Collection

This study employed purposive sampling techniques, which Maxwell (1997) defined as sampling in which "particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices" (p. 87). The population of interest for this study was secondary students, between grades 9 through 12, currently attending a secular public school in Southern Alberta. Two separate school divisions granted access to their student population within seven schools for recruitment for this study. School-level administrators were given the final decision on school inclusion, and five of the seven principals endorsed the study, while two principals declined participation out of fear of parental and community backlash.

Students of all genders and sexualities were invited to participate, but participation required signed parental consent, which was a requirement of the school divisions and a practice which aligned with the best practices for research involving partially dependent persons and with the Canadian Psychological Association's (2017) *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists*, fourth edition. Recruitment involved all teachers reading a recruitment script simultaneously to their classes to ensure the entire student body received the same invitation and opportunity to participate at the same time. Recruitment also involved posters around the school, many of which were placed in confidential locations including the school counsellor's offices. Students contacted the researcher directly.

Six participants contacted the researcher and met the criteria for participation. The criteria for participation included attending grades 9 through 12, having signed parental consent and participant assent to participate, and willing to engage in at least one open-ended narrative interview about the topic of heteronormativity as they experienced it at school. The 6 participants ranged in age from 14- to 17 years-old. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym, and this replaced their name on all transcripts and narrative accounts. Two participants identified as transgender, 1 male (Jayce) and 1 female (Dana), and the other 4 identified as cisgender females (Rosie, Hunter, Elisabeth, and Nicole). Regarding sexual orientation, 2 participants identified as bisexual (Elisabeth and Nicole), 2 as pansexual (Dana and Jayce), 1 as queer (Hunter), and 1 as heterosexual (Rosie). All students were Canadian born and identified as white.

Students were invited to participate in multiple one-to-one, open-ended interviews. Interviews were kept invitational and participant-led and aimed for rich, nuanced, storied samples of subjectivity to discover how it feels to

live within a heteronormative school environment (Josselson, 2013). The interviews began with a series of warm-up questions which asked about students' experiences in their personal life and the media pertaining to gender and sexual diversity.

Next, definitions were sought from each participant for key terms (e.g., gender minority, gay, lesbian, cisgender) to ensure individual definitions matched the terminology of the study so that the participants' language could be mirrored in the interview and captured in the narrative accounts. Participants were asked about their beliefs regarding the rights of individuals who were gender- and sexually-diverse. These warm-up questions helped focus participants on the topic of gender- and sexually-diverse individuals at school, and helped participants become comfortable in the interview setting. This step helped youth focus on specific encounters and lived experiences around this theme. Next, the interview began by asking students to discuss any specific instances at school that either promoted or interfered with equal rights and support for students who are gender- or sexually-diverse. From here, each interview took a different direction based on each participant's personalized history and interpretation of the questions.

After the first round of interviews, students were invited to participate in a second interview. Five of the six participants engaged in a second interview, with two of the participants requesting a third interview. Subsequent interviews were kept open-ended, where students determined the interview's direction and content. A total of 13 interviews were conducted, equalling 12.3 interview hours. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim (Maxwell, 2005). Common themes, as well as the most unique, informative, and profound aspects of the narratives, were selected using narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Josselson, 2013; Kim, 2016).

Data Analysis

The data analysis of narrative research involves interpretation at every stage, which inevitably is the result of what the researcher chooses to attend to when reading and re-reading narrative accounts. Resultingly, the narrative researcher is not separate from, or outside of, the text (Josselson, 2013; Kim, 2016). The initial analysis involved creating narrative vignettes, which provided a storied account of the interviews and weaved together verbatim quotes in chronological order of events. This process followed McCormack's (2004) "storying" stories approach as it aligned with the goal of exploring, "individuals' understandings of their experience in the context of their everyday lives while simultaneously looking to the wider social/cultural resources on which people draw to help them make sense of their lives" (McCormack, 2004, p. 220).

Each vignette was three- to five-pages long and involved capturing several important encounters shared by each participant and organizing them chronologically to capture a storied sample of their lived experiences about heteronormativity at school. These vignettes were returned to the participants for

member checking to prevent over-interpretation. Participants could add, delete, or adjust the narrative vignettes. None of the participants made amendments to their narratives, and 5 participants identified feeling deeply moved by having their stories captured authentically.

The results shared in this article were obtained through the narrative analysis, also called the paradigmatic mode of analysis, which attempts to fit individual details into a larger pattern (Kim, 2016). Through this analysis, using stories as data, common themes were discovered and organized under several categories, such as common experiences and perceptions, barriers to inclusion, and hopeful encounters (Kim, 2016). Polkinghorne's (1995) conceptualization of the analysis of narratives is summarized by Kim (2016) as:

1. Describing the categories of particular themes.
2. Uncovering commonalities that exist across multiple sources of data.
3. Producing general knowledge from a set of evidence found in a collection of stories.

Analysis of the narrative sought to arrange data around common themes across the collected stories (Kim, 2016; Polkinghorne, 1995). Interview transcripts were uploaded to a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program, NVivo, for ease of sorting and coding interview data. Transcripts were uploaded after each interview and were reviewed considering previous transcripts, and thematic categories were refined to account for new data as it was collected. Relevant literature informed the coding and analysis process to maintain constant comparison, which is encouraged in the process of thematic analysis (Charmez, 2000).

Transcripts of all 13 narrative interviews were coded and re-coded throughout the data collection stage, with a final stage of coding performed at the end of data collection. From this final stage of coding, three categories emerged: (a) structural forces impacting systemic heteronormativity, (b) climate within school spaces, and (c) moments of hope and words of wisdom. Each of these categories included several themes. Shared here are the themes which emerged from the category of the overall climate of school spaces, as experienced by secondary students, within the context of heteronormativity.

RESULTS

This article takes up one specific category obtained from the analysis of narratives as they pertain to shared experiences of distress and systemic heterosexism and heteronormativity experienced by students. The findings discussed in this article are organized around common encounters and negotiations students shared relating to how they experienced and navigated various aspects of their school environments. The findings are organized by the following themes: (a) normalization of name-calling; (b) vulnerable spaces; and (c) harm of heteronormativity. These themes are discussed below with implications provided for school counsellors interested in interrupting these systemic influences.

Normalization of Name-Calling

A common finding across the narrative interviews was how desensitized many students and staff had become to routine homophobic and transphobic language in their schools. Each participant highlighted that discriminatory language, such as "that's so gay," "fag," and "faggot," were commonplace at school, and participants universally reported school staff did little to nothing to address this language. Dana commented, "If someone says 'that's so gay' right now, no one even cares. I know nothing gets done about it at least once a day." Elisabeth reported, "as soon as you use 'gay,' it's like, turn a blind eye. Everyone just brushes it off." These statements illustrated how some school staff were failing to stand up against commonplace, routine verbal abuse, which is a systemic failure to protect gender- and sexually-diverse students and an illustration of a microaggression contributing to minority stress.

While teachers and their heterosexual peers may be desensitized to commonplace abusive language, research strongly supports that gender- and sexually-diverse students are not desensitized, and this language is harmful to their well-being. The lack of response to these slurs sends the message that it is permissible in the school environment to treat diverse peers oppressively. In this way, the school culture maintains discriminatory attitudes towards gender- and sexually-diverse individuals. Elisabeth shared her thoughts on what message this language sends:

I think it sends the message that it's okay. I mean the students don't get into trouble. It's just really unfortunate that it's not talked about because it does a million more times harm than it does good. It just gets deeper and deeper into our thoughts, and if that person isn't corrected ever, they grow up thinking the same stuff. It's like the elephant in the room that no one knows how to address.

Hunter also expressed a belief that failing to address the language sent a clear message to gender- and sexually-diverse students about their relevancy at school and said, "I think it keeps it as different and out of the norm, like something that isn't important enough to talk about." Dana also discussed the repercussion when her teachers didn't stand up against derogatory language used by her peers:

When kids say something, like "that's so gay" or "you're a faggot" or stuff like that, it's a lot more than just a joke. I don't want to be the kind of person saying you can't have free speech, but it's more than that. You have to do something about it because it's so much more than a joke. That really impacts someone like a lot more than even just making them sad for a day. It's just so much, and I don't feel like they know that. It makes you feel like you can't be yourself and school isn't a safe environment, and they're always saying school is a place for learning, but it's like, well then make school a place for learning. Don't let that shit fly. What are you doing?

The participants' commentary of routine disregard of homophobic and transphobic language emphasizes a call to all school staff to pay attention and be more intentional about calling out the language students use. This understanding

presents an opportunity for school counsellors to educate other staff and personnel of the harm of normalized homophobic and transphobic microaggressions, and the importance of intervening by educating students on the oppressive undertones contained in these derogatory slurs.

Vulnerable Spaces

The participants consistently identified two vulnerable spaces at school where they experienced a lack of support and safety resulting from inconsideration of the rights and needs of gender- and sexually-diverse students. The first vulnerable space was the gymnasium/physical education class and locker-room space. The second vulnerable space, highlighted as uncomfortable and unwelcoming, was the bathroom. Dana, a female transgender student, spoke the most about the discomfort she experienced from having to take physical education and using the boys' locker room to change for class. She identified this as the primary barrier to her ability to transition and feel safe doing so. The locker room was identified as a place where male students could talk unsupervised, where conversations tended to be racist, derogatory, and disrespectful. Four participants also identified the gymnasium and physical education class as an uncomfortable or unsafe space. Hunter's school was sports-focused, and physical education class was a place for judgment of worth and value. Elisabeth noted students in her school take physical education very seriously, like it's "the Olympics," breeding intense competition and seriousness that made it a vulnerable space. Nicole also commented on the chaotic nature of the physical education environment that made it an uncomfortable space. Dana discussed the vulnerable nature of physical education class specifically in the context of identifying as transgender; a time when her body was on display:

> As a trans person, you're obviously insecure about your body. Like, as satisfied as you could be about your weight or all that kind of thing, until you 100% transition, and even then, sometimes not, it's never what you feel it should be or what you want it to be. You were born into the wrong body, so I feel like that's just on display in gym when you're running around and stuff. And then there are the girls who… are running around in spandex shorts up to their cervix and it's not that that's what I want, but it's like I want to be able to have the freedom to do that.

The discomfort of physical education class for some students is not unique to those who identify as gender- or sexually-diverse. However, Doull, Watson, Smith, Homma, and Saewyc (2016) pointed out that gender- and sexually-diverse students are only half as likely to participate in school-based sports compared to their heterosexual and cisgender peers. The culture of heteronormativity increases the risk of discomfort for students who do not fit the gender binary or heterosexual norm. Beyond the unavoidable discomfort from the fast-paced, intense, loud, and competitive environment of physical education class, Dana also discussed a specific practice in physical education that made this class particularly challenging for her to navigate:

One thing that gets me so raging is when the teacher splits up the class by boys and girls. It's like literally I die. What is that accomplishing? First of all, it's separating me from my friends, which I really wouldn't have that big of a problem with if he was splitting the teams up fairly, but because they are assuming that someone is a guy because they have short hair or because they have a strong jawline or because they don't have boobs or because they've got a dick or whatever. It's like you don't know what's in that person's pants first of all. They also don't necessarily care what's in your heart or what you identify as because they think that it doesn't have anything to do with it. It's hard because you don't want to be going against what's easiest just for everyone else because there's a chance that someone in that class might not feel the gender that they were assigned. But I just feel like, are you that lazy that you can't just take it into consideration? Because that is seriously one of the worst feelings ever.

Dana's experience highlighted the daily microaggressions encountered by gender- and sexually-diverse students in common and routine practices at school.

The participants' narratives of their experiences of discomfort and vulnerability in physical education classes highlighted simple ways school counsellors can be advocates for those students who do not identify with heteronormativity. School counsellors can advocate for the removal of gender segregation in activities across all classes and school activities. They can work with physical education teachers to watch for the competitiveness that may be alienating some students and include a variety of activities that all students can excel at individually. The participants' narrative around the vulnerable space of physical education and the locker room also called for further dialogue about how to make these spaces, and this required course, more amenable to the needs of gender- and sexually-diverse students. School counsellors are well situated to open these dialogues and engage their administrators to consider how the locker-room and physical education class can be made safer and more engaging for all students.

The bathroom was the second vulnerable space discussed by participants. While the schools featured in this study were all mandated by the Alberta government in the past two years to set up gender-neutral washroom spaces (Alberta Education, 2016), and also permit students who are transgender to use the washroom of their identified gender, none of the participants had ever had their educators or administrators inform the student body about these spaces. When asked what they would do if they needed to access a safe bathroom space at school, four participants did not know what they would do.

Jayce, a transgender student, said his school did not specifically address the topic but, with his transition, the school opened the "handicapped" bathroom for his use, which he was expected to use instead of the washroom of his identified gender. While Jayce was accepting of this accommodation, the bathroom was on a completely different wing of the school in a hallway not allocated to his grade-level classes. The assigned washroom took him a significant amount of time to access, which would result in his having to ask his teachers for "extra time to go pee."

For Dana, she felt her school had not addressed this topic, and her perception of what bathroom space was assigned for transgender students was the following:

> I think there is a bathroom in the sickroom you can use, but even then, I wouldn't want to use it because then it's like I'm being singled out as someone who is the other. I don't want to go into the sick person's bathroom. Why would I be any different than anyone else who uses their bathroom? For one, I'm not neutral. And two, I'm not sick.

The fact that four participants had no idea how they would obtain safe access to a washroom or change room, and no participant had heard any dialogue around bathroom spaces, highlighted their schools' possible negligence to provide safe bathroom spaces for all students, or communicate where such spaces could be accessed. This could deter gender-diverse students from transitioning in high school and is another example of a routine microaggression being unacknowledged in schools. Schools that fail to provide safe bathroom space to students violate their mandate to create school spaces that promote respect and dignity for all students. While this is an individual school and school division issue, counsellors should be aware of legislation that protects students' rights to have access to the washroom space of their identified gender, or a gender-neutral bathroom.

Harm of Heteronormativity

Across the narrative interviews, participants provided examples of heteronormativity in classrooms demonstrated through interactions with both teachers and with peers. Several participants recalled moments where they were confronted with the pressures of heteronormativity and felt the consequences for non-conformity. Dana recalled one of the times she was called a "faggot" was in gym class because she didn't catch the football, falling short of heteronormative ideals of male athleticism. She felt uncomfortable with the boys at her school because of the way they treated her, and the expectations she felt when in their presence:

> Because I'm not straight, they totally distance themselves from me in the most obvious way. Just because I don't act like that, you think I'm like some kind of freak of nature you can't even tolerate being around? When I'm with the guys, I feel like it's someone trying to push you down and make you lesser and conform to what they think is the ideal man.

Elisabeth similarly recounted how the language of heteronormativity was conditioned and unconscious amongst her peers, particularly regarding athleticism:

> In gym class for example, if a group of certain guys are on one team, they're like "oh no, they're stacked" but nobody looks at the more athletic girls that are maybe even better than that, they just think the boys are the alphas in the gym class. They are the best ones when, in reality, I was kind of noticing they're really not. There's a lot of girls that are equal to them. But everyone gets so intimidated over the guys and don't really appreciate any of the girls who might be more athletic or capable of doing something.

Hunter also described how the achievements of girls in sports were minimized and, instead, the focus placed on their appearance:

> Even though that girl is on the volleyball team and maybe she did a really great job and won the game for the rest of the team, nobody really pays attention to that. They just pay attention to the shorts she's wearing while she's playing.

These instances shared by Dana, Hunter, and Elisabeth all capture instances of their peers enacting their socialization around heteronormativity. Their experiences demonstrated that this socialization, if left uninterrupted, has a significant impact on peer relationships and identity development. As young people try to navigate their new desire for independence, close connections with peers represent a fundamental developmental need to constructing a healthy sense of self. These instances represent moments of rupture between gender- and sexually-diverse individuals, and the connections they are attempting to form with their peers as well as with themselves. By calling out these moments of sexism and heterosexism, school counsellors can help individual students establish acceptance and appreciation of themselves beyond a limiting gender binary.

The narratives also illuminated some of the rules that these participants' peers enacted around appropriate behaviours and attire based on gender. In our interviews, it was clear that Hunter felt the presence of a strong heteronormative bias at her school, particularly on the girls:

> It's basically if, by societal standards you are ugly, they'll ignore you. If by societal standards you are too boyish, they'll ignore you. If by society's standards you are kind of different, they'll ignore you. But if you're within a certain degree of attractiveness, and then you are okay with them touching you, harassing you, you know, all of that gross stuff. If you're okay with that and you go along with it, then they will pay attention to you. But, if then, you stand up for yourself and say, "Hey, I didn't like that, why are you doing that?" then she's a whore and they ignore you.

Hunter went on to highlight many other rules the girls at school had to follow to avoid the consequences of being ignored or called derogatory names: Girls can't cut their hair, they need to wear makeup, they can wear comfortable clothes only if those clothes are sports-related, and they must wear a thong with their tights.

Hunter's honest and insightful conversation about the rules of heteronormativity operating on the girls at her school illuminated a missed opportunity school staff have to challenge and address norms that are harmful to all females. As trained mental health professionals, school counsellors have an important role in calling attention to these social biases within their schools. Teaching youth to notice how women are objectified in the media, and how these messages limit and reduce them to their appearance, can help interrupt harmful heteronormative attitudes. School counsellors have the unique opportunity to interact with students in a personalized setting and, if primed to notice heteronormativity and heterosexism operating

on students,counsellors can help develop an awareness of these discourses, which better equips students to interrupt the limitations being put on their developing identity.

DISCUSSION

Having a positive identity related to gender orientation and sexual orientation is essential to positive psychological well-being (Alderson, 2012). The absence of a positive identity can result in several risk factors including suicidality, general apathy, anxiety, depression, and other emotional health outcomes (Alderson, 2012). On the contrary, having a positive identity is attributed to several protective factors against emotional distress; factors such as self-worth, courage, self-acceptance, acceptance of others, self-determination, and actualization (Alderson, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Through the process of normalization, schools play a critical role in modelling what identities are acceptable. Normalization constructs, establishes, produces, and reproduces a taken-for-granted and all-encompassing standard used to measure goodness, desirability, morality, rationality, superiority, and a host of other dominant cultural values (Yep, 2003). In the context of heteronormativity, these standards have consequences for the emotional wellness and inclusion experience of gender- and sexually-diverse students.

As the results showed, participants experienced barriers to developing a positive identity, and ongoing oppression from routine marginalization and microaggressions through normalized name-calling, unprotected vulnerable spaces, and peer-enforced heteronormativity. To better understand how to support these students, participants were asked what initiatives, practices, or moments they found hopeful within their schools that demonstrated movement towards supporting gender- and sexually-diverse students.

Two participants identified self-determination as an ameliorating factor to their marginalization. Rosie's self-determination was supported when she proposed doing a social studies project on marriage equality. Rosie's teacher initially refused her proposal, but she advocated for the right to research this topic with her principal, which was subsequently accepted. For Jayce, he worked with his school principal to distribute an email to his teachers about his name change and preferred pronouns at the start of his social transition. In both Rosie and Jayce's examples, having their schools support them by allowing them to advocate for their needs empowered them and allowed them to overcome some of the microaggressions and minority stress they were experiencing. This finding has important implications for school counsellors, who are uniquely positioned to advocate for student self-determination and guide intervention and school initiatives to support them. Counsellors working with students who are transitioning play an important role in letting students define their accommodations. Counsellors can support students in dialogue with teachers and administration to have their needs heard and respected. Principals hold positions of power and authority in schools, which can make them

unapproachable for individual students, particularly students with low self-worth or those struggling with emotional health distress.

School counsellors, drawing on their relationship with school administration and with individual students, can offer an avenue for students to self-identify appropriate supports and accommodations to their administration and advocate for themselves. Some important areas for counsellors and students to explore are their chosen name, pronouns, what bathroom they would like to use, how they would like to navigate the locker room or phys-ed class, gender-segregated activities, and what peer experiences and interactions with school staff are impeding their freedom to express themselves authentically. Through their understanding of individual students and their relationships with school staff and administration, school counsellors are uniquely positioned to provide a platform for student voices to be heard, acknowledged, and to create possibilities for self-determination in each student's transition needs. This advocacy can have an enduring impact on students' ability to leave high school feeling positive about their gender identity and sexual orientation, and permit them to continue to explore, with genuine curiosity and acceptance, all aspects of their identity.

As highlighted in the results, when teachers and school staff routinely ignore microaggressions, this normalizes homophobic and transphobic language. However, when teachers and staff address this language, students feel supported and have some stress alleviated through experiencing an ally who understands the harm of this oppressive language. Dana recounted a time when she was called a "fag" at school by a peer, and her teacher reacted by sending this student to the office. This instance let her feel relevant and visible, and she felt safer in her classroom as a result. When school staff stand against these microaggressions, it sends a message to gender- and sexually-diverse students that their identities are valid and protected at school.

Many school staff may be unaware of the power of these reprimands, and school counsellors play an important role in bringing this to the attention of educators and administrators. Counsellors should work with their staff groups to help them understand the importance of not only addressing derogatory language but also in addressing the systemic oppression contained in slurs like, "that's so gay." By educating educators, school counsellors can interrupt the systemic oppression of homophobic and transphobic language, and help students feel supported so they can focus on learning. When students see their school counsellors as allies and accomplices in this process, students experience a greater sense of trust and safety that can enhance their willingness to access the support of their school counsellor on a more individual level.

Three participants discussed instances where peers were a stress-ameliorating factor and an important source of support and hope. These peers gave the participants a sense of safety, a space where they were free to be themselves, and a reprieve from hostility. These participants did not have a GSA established at their schools. This finding highlighted the importance of peer support groups, like GSAs, in providing a space for acceptance and the experience of universality.

School counsellors have a role in establishing and supporting GSAs in schools as they provide a meaningful space for connection, empowerment, and support. The literature strongly supports the positive impact of GSAs on gender- and sexually-diverse students' well-being and connectedness (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2004; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011; Taylor et al., 2011). Two participants discussed their involvement in their school's GSA, and indicated it was a positive space; however, they both highlighted some concerns about the level of staff involvement and leadership and resulting stagnation or limited activity and conversation. They also noted that students participating in GSAs exposed themselves to bullying and, to maintain their safety, students sometimes kept their involvement in the club and its activities quiet, or avoided participating altogether.

School counsellors should be educated on the intentional use of this group-level support (i.e., participating in GSAs) and the way it can alleviate distress when implemented in an informed and appropriate manner. Counsellors can also support GSAs in reaching an audience of students beyond the meeting room and promoting increased appreciation and respect for this form of diversity. The GSA represents an important group-level resource that can support minority coping (Meyer, 2003) and can be invaluable for young people at this developmental stage, particularly those who lack parental support or other group-level support systems. Although in isolation a GSA will do little to interrupt the systemic nature of heterosexism and heteronormativity, it is an important part of the solution towards interrupting heteronormativity.

A final implication for school counsellors acting as advocates and support persons for gender- and sexually-diverse students included interrupting heteronormativity through individual encounters and group-level workshops or presentations. The results of this study demonstrate that students benefit from explicit instruction on gender binaries, gender stereotypes, and heteronormativity. By offering universal educational opportunities for students to challenge these socially constructed categories, students become better equipped to interrupt the limiting messages contained in a heteronormative discourse.

Even though this topic is typically not addressed at school, students routinely police one another to uphold rigid gender binaries and stereotypes, which are oppressive for all students but particularly harmful for gender- and sexually-diverse students. As Yep (2003) pointed out, the normalization of heteronormativity is a site of violence against the "psyches, souls, and bodies" (p. 17) of women, men, and transgender people across the spectrum of sexualities. Yep described this violence against women in the form of compulsory heterosexuality, which channels women into marriage and motherhood in the service of men and maintains male dominance and power. Heteronormativity is also violent against men, promoting shame and fear, and perpetrating an exhausting and unending standard of what it means to be a "real" man, by which all men must compare themselves and to which virtually no man could attain (Yep, 2003).

School counsellors can have a systemic impact against heteronormativity by educating teachers to watch for the manifestation of these limiting discourses

within interactions with and between students. School counsellors can also provide grade-level presentations, workshops, or groups to equip educators and/or students with the knowledge they need to interrupt heteronormative messages within and outside of school. By building capacity with educators and students, change can happen systemically, and all parts of the school community can work together to disrupt the heteronormative school culture.

Finally, school counsellors can work with students individually to understand when heteronormativity is contributing to their distress and help them distance themselves from this discourse. School counsellors can facilitate this process by empowering all students to adopt an individual and authentic representation of themselves; one that defies socialized standards of morality, goodness, and desirability based on the social construction of gender norms.

Limitations

The focus of this study was to discover rich and detailed accounts of the lived experience of individual students. As such, the sample size was small (i.e., 6 participants), and while these participants had important and relevant stories to share about their school experiences, they are not meant to generalize to all students who are gender- and sexually-diverse. Additionally, this study was conducted in small rural towns in Southern Alberta, an area well known to be populated with individuals who are conservative in their values and beliefs. Students attending schools embedded in these communities may experience heteronormativity differently than students attending schools in urban locations.

Finally, the requirement for parental consent meant all the participants had, on some level, parental knowledge and support of their gender and sexual identity. This inhibited students who did not have parental support from participating in this study. Thus, the experiences of students who do not have parental support were not captured. These uncaptured narratives could demonstrate different lived experiences that require different supports from their school counsellors beyond those obtained by the participants in this study.

Conclusion

The findings from this study offer important insights from students who are currently trying to navigate the often hostile and heterosexist school spaces. By listening to their experiences, opportunities are illuminated for school counsellors to work with students, educators, administrators, and policymakers, to create meaningful changes in their schools and promote a welcoming, safe, and inclusive learning environment.

Based on the most recent Canadian study exploring school climates about gender and sexual diversity, there remains a high number of gender- and sexually-diverse students who are uncomfortable accessing support, regarding topics of gender and sexuality, from their school counsellor (Taylor et al., 2011). School counsellors are uniquely positioned to provide opportunities for empowerment, advocacy, self-determination, and reflection with individual students and

groups. Counsellors can support students in advocating for a more inclusive and democratic educational experience.

Often, when teachers encounter a student who is having trouble at school, they will reach out to the school counsellor for guidance and support. By listening to the stories contained in this paper, counsellors can better understand the barriers that students who are gender- and sexually-diverse experience when pursuing their right to develop a healthy identity. School counsellors can collaborate with their educational team. They can also collaborate with gender- and sexually-diverse youth to create school spaces that help them thrive, and allow space for diverse gender expressions and non-heteronormative sexual orientations.

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