

**Trans- Youth Matter(s): An Exploration of the ‘Safe’ Space Phenomenon**

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## **Abstract**

This research notices the ways that safe space gets talked about in relation to education. In particular, I explore the phenomenon of safe space through the school-based experiences and perspectives of trans-identified and non-binary youth. Qualitative data was gathered from interviews conducted with young trans-identified and non-binary individuals (ages 19-24) who have recently attended a public secondary school in Ontario. The method of narrative inquiry is used to focus on depth and detail in each narrative—what matters to the youth is central. The goal is to open up the many meanings of safe space and suggest some ways that schools can do better in supporting the needs of trans-identified and non-binary students.

The findings reveal that securing a single, definitive understanding of safe space is not entirely possible, or ideal; each youths' encounters in, and relationships to, school spaces were unique to their experience, which renders the concept slippery and hard to pin down. Moreover, safe space as rooted in a kind of 'protectionist' education rhetoric is not necessarily reflective of the perspectives of the youth in this research, whose meanings around, and experiences of, safe space cross over many boundaries with various attachments. Therefore, Canada's education system might be better served by conceptualizing safety more broadly—beyond security and control of schooling—and in a way that considers trans- youths' school-based realities.

I also tried to demonstrate how schools, specifically educators, might do better in supporting trans- youth by offering an action piece in the form of a list of suggestions. The following are amongst the most effective ways to address the support needs that the youth have identified in this thesis: (1) accept that we all have a social location; (2) see self-reflection and education as ongoing; (3) provide access to information; (4) stumble over language; and (5) implement gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

What is this thing called ‘safe’ space? The idea of ‘safeness’ alone appears transparent and simple, penetrating school spaces through objects, practices, procedures, policies, rules, and relations in an ordinary, everyday kind of way. What this calls for is an articulation of safe space that is curious about its beginnings, its trajectory, and seeks to account for its many meanings. I approach safe space as a restless phenomenon that impacts the school day, its shape and texture. This research notices the ways that safe space gets talked about in relation to education, particularly in the narratives of young trans-identified and non-binary individuals that I interviewed who have recently attended a public secondary school in Ontario. The goal is to explore the many meanings of safe space and suggest some ways that schools can do better in supporting the needs of trans-identified and non-binary students.

As a recent graduate of a teacher education program in Ontario, I set out to turn safe space on its head, so to speak, to find out what is underneath, around, and behind the concept; to do so, I pose questions often not asked, precisely because they might be unspeakable in the educational context and, perhaps, they may never be fully and completely answered. In other words, I hope to shake up what we think we know about safe space. *What are its attachments? What does a safe space look like? Is there such a thing as safe space? How might school spaces be safe? Who are schools being made safe for (and from)? And, who gets to decide?*

Despite all the work being done in Canada’s education system to foster safe spaces in schools, there are many trans-identified students who face barriers to education because schooling is so deeply entwined with the male-female gender binary. Egale Canada’s<sup>1</sup> 2011 national student climate survey, *Every Class in Every School*, that studied safe schools and

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<sup>1</sup> Egale Canada (previously Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere) is a human rights organization that promotes equality for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people in Canada.

transphobia reveals this troubling reality; the study finds 78% of trans-identified students indicated feeling unsafe in some way at school and 44% have missed school because of those feelings (Taylor et. al. “Every Class” 23).<sup>2</sup> When thinking through these statistics I am reminded of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who argued, “it is only by being shameless about *risking the obvious* that we happen into the vicinity of the transformative” (22; emphasis mine). How I interpret this is that it is easy to name the transphobia that insidiously demeans the humanness of trans- youth. Also, it is an immediate issue that many trans- and gender nonconforming students are brushing up against a hostile climate in their schools (Dyck 6-8; Taylor et. al. “Every Class” 28); yet, what rests beneath this issue is a much needed engagement with the familiar and the everydayness in education to open up safe space as contradictory and fragile, but also ripe with possibility. Ursula Kelly puts it eloquently, borrowing from C.W. Mills, she writes, “‘make strange the familiar’ so as to find new ways to understand complex and changing phenomena (“Module Six Part 1”;

Mills 5-7).

In an effort to bridge a gap between discourse and its material effects, I explore safe space as guided by the following question: *What are trans- youths’ meanings around, and experiences of, ‘safe’ space from high school?* In answering this question, I do not evaluate the relative safeness of school spaces or critique the effectiveness and reach of safe school policies, but instead explore how safe space is understood and experienced from the perspectives of the youth. What carries this research throughout is the guiding philosophy that trans- youth matter and what matters to trans- youth—what they deem important—is valuable knowledge that demands attention.

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<sup>2</sup> The data for *Every Class in Every School* was collected through two methods: individual participation in an open-access online survey and in-class sessions conducted with high school students from twenty school boards across Canada (Taylor et. al. 38). The survey included questions about gender identity, LGBTQ+ content in the curriculum, inclusive/safe school policies, and teacher advocacy for gender nonconforming students (Taylor et. al. 14).

## 1.1 Trans- with a Hyphen

“Defining terminology is an awkward and difficult pursuit” as noted by Catherine Nash in a study of trans peoples’ experiences in lesbian and queer space (“Trans Experiences” 193). For the purposes of this research, I place a hyphen after ‘trans’ following Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore’s explanation for the hyphen in a special Trans- issue of *Women Studies Quarterly*: “the hyphen matters a great deal, precisely because it marks the difference between the implied nominalism of ‘trans’ and the explicit relationality of ‘trans-,’ which remains open-ended and resists premature foreclosure by attachment to any single suffix” (11). That is to say, ‘trans-’ cannot be neatly pinned down by narrow definitions and/or simple attachments; its complexity moves beyond easy and straightforward uses as an umbrella term (usually implied in trans\* with an asterisk) and it is certainly not universally applicable. ‘Trans-’ as described by Stryker et al. effectively lends itself to self-defining aims, which is especially useful for this research because how individuals self-identify their gender is of most importance. Therefore, I use ‘trans-’ in this thesis unless I directly quote or refer to someone who uses the term (or a different term) in a more specific manner. I also acknowledge the particularities of how each interview partner identifies by speaking with, and referring to, them using their (in some cases, chosen) name and pronouns. As Maggie Nelson puts it in *The Argonauts*,<sup>3</sup> “the best way to find out how people feel about their gender or their sexuality—or anything else, really—is to listen to what they tell you, and try to treat them accordingly, without shellacking over their version of reality with yours” (53).

With this in mind, I still need to think through the gap, and potential harm, in not mentioning the rich myriad of gender and sexual identities every time I refer to trans- in my

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<sup>3</sup> Nelson’s *The Argonauts* blends autobiography with theory to trace her relationship with her fluidly gendered partner and their journey to and through parenthood.



writing; I recognize that trans- is not a ‘one size fits all’ category. As such, I bear in mind Stryker’s suggestion that gender might be better understood as proliferating vertically and not necessarily as moving back and forth on a horizontal axis with ‘woman’ on one end and ‘man’ at the other, each acting as dominant points of reference (148). For Stryker, gender is a kind of emerging action—she calls attention to the “wild profusion of gendered subject positions, spawned by the ruptures of ‘woman’ and ‘man’ like an archipelago of identities rising from the sea” (148).<sup>4</sup> While this research does lean in to moments that *rupture* the male-female gender binary in school spaces, it will not automatically disavow masculine and feminine as expressions of gender. As Julia Serano’s articulates in *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*, research involving trans- people should focus its attention away from “shattering the gender binary” seeing as it invariably pits gender conforming and gender nonconforming people against one another and because some trans- people locate meaning within this binary (359). I take the openness of ‘trans-’ with a hyphen as an invitation to consider how school spaces might open up representational possibilities, which include both male and female but also, importantly, other gendered ways of being in the world.

## 1.2 Significance

An exploration of the safe space phenomenon is significant for two primary reasons: (1) it offers different perspectives, those of trans-identified and non-binary youth, which will expand understandings of safe space; and (2) those who work with trans-identified and non-binary youth

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<sup>4</sup> The following are examples of gendered subject positions (and are by no means limited to): intersex, androgynous, butch, femme, nellie, queen, third sex, two spirit, tomboy, sissy, drag king, female impersonator, she-male, he-she, boydyke, girlfag, transsexual, transvestite, transgender, cross-dresser, queer, genderqueer, gender retired, non-binary, gender fluid, gender nonconforming and more; again, this is not an exhaustive list, and some people identify in a way that crosses over, cuts across, multiplies, and shifts between gendered subject positions (Stryker 148).

in schools will find the research useful because it will provide information that can enable them to be more effective.

This study is designed to provide a starting point or stirring from which to open up the many meanings of safe space—meanings that often remain on the margins because the frequent appeal to ‘safe’ in education policy forecloses other ways of knowing the concept; as such, the youths’ narratives contribute to a more complex and nuanced understanding of safe space. By offering up details of what were, for the youth I interviewed, ‘on the ground’ experiences from high school, I try to present a more vivid picture of safe space on their behalf.

My work will also contribute to literature in education where safe space is considered a commonly used yet under theorized concept (Barrett 1; Boostrum 397; Hunter 6). This thesis is a means of entering into the discussion surrounding safe schools in Canada, a discussion that can easily become stalled by talk of zero-tolerance policies, anti-bullying measures, and security and control of the school environment—discussions that tend to ignore meanings of safe space from the perspectives of young trans- people, which, I argue, can (and should) be given prominence. The growing concern around safeness in schools indicates that this research is both important and timely. Moreover, this research offers an action piece for moving forward; I present the interview partners’ suggestions on how trans- youth can be better supported in schools.

Above all, this is a project that touches all of us because we are all implicated in the gendered spaces of schooling. Most of us spend a great deal of our time, in the earlier years of our lives, learning about the world through education (Savage and Schanding 2); but, if we can begin to reflect on the sources of and the power effects of those educative spaces, along with recognizing the vulnerability of our own lives, then we may be better able to connect with and to support one another across differences (Stauffer “Interview”; Kelly “Module Six Part 1”). My

hope is that this research fosters a *teachable moment*, a moment that invites us to critically reflect on the intersections among schooling, gender, and safe space. I offer this thesis as an example of research that finds new and other ways to conceptualize social phenomena; put differently, I aim to demonstrate that building knowledges around a particular phenomenon is possible.

### 1.3 Roadmap of Chapters

In terms of a kind of thesis roadmap or direction: Up to now, I have introduced the research, its significance, and my research question and goal. The remaining sections of Chapter 1 include a (brief) history of safe space followed by a discussion of context, to *place* this research in Ontario. I also review some of the relevant literature. The theory that grounds this research, geographies of sexualities and trans- geographies, is the topic of Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, I present my research method/ology by detailing the data collection process, my chosen method of narrative inquiry for analyzing the data, and the researcher stance that I bring to bear on this topic. Chapter 4 is where I discuss the research findings; here, I explore encounters with, and interpretations of, safe space from the youths' narratives. The content of Chapter 5 is a list of suggestions for moving forward, that emerged from the youths' narratives, on the subject of how schools, specifically educators, can better support trans- youth. Chapter 6, the concluding chapter, provides a summary of the research and its limitations, and considers directions for future research.

### 1.4 (Brief) History of Safe Space

Safe space is not, strictly speaking, a new idea; however, there is a certain 'nowness' about this concept as its shift into popular usage in education reflects an expansion, presumably of its meaning, and certainly of its impact on the school day. Therefore, it might be useful to

trace a (brief) history or background of safe space in terms of when the concept first emerged and where it has travelled. *Does safe space have its own history? Where do I trace its roots, its beginnings?*

Safe space has been talked about as having a “lively history” in both activist and pedagogical communities (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1346). First appearing in the women’s movement in the late twentieth century, safe space implied a “certain license to speak and act freely, form collective strength, and generate strategies for resistance” writes Moira Kenney in *Mapping Gay L.A.: The Intersection of Place and Politics*, which traces safe space to the legacy of feminist, queer, and civil rights activism in the United States during the 1960s and 70s (24). “Safe space,” Kenney indicates, “was a means rather than an end and not only a physical space but a space created by the coming together of women searching for community” (24). Because the concept emerged out of movements that advocated for community-building and free speech, safe space, in turn, became associated with the language of protecting marginalized groups from harassment and violence (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1346). In 1989, the Safe Space symbol was created for the Gay & Lesbian Urban Explorers (GLUE) safe-space program as a symbolic means for allies<sup>5</sup> to display their support for gay and lesbian rights and to designate their work spaces free from homophobia (Raeburn 209; see Figure 1). During GLUE’s events and educational workshops there were flyers and magnets handed out bearing imagery of the Safe Space symbol—an inverted pink triangle (borrowed from ACT-UP)<sup>6</sup> surrounded by a green circle to represent “universal acceptance” (Raeburn 209).

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<sup>5</sup> An Ally is a person who is, broadly speaking, alliance-based when it comes to gender and sexuality in that they support LGBTQ+ rights and social movements, and challenge homophobia, transphobia, and biphobia (Serano 358).

<sup>6</sup> ACT-UP stands for the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, an action-focused, grassroots group who brought attention to the socio-cultural, political, and medical indifference surrounding the AIDS epidemic (Raeburn 209). For a raw and inspiring look at ACT-UP’s involvement in the early years of the AIDS epidemic, see David France’s documentary film *How to Survive a Plague* (2012).



Figure 1: Safe Space symbol (source: Wikimedia Commons)

Safety itself is, and has been, a foundational element of feminist activism and communities. In the context of feminist activism, safe space is related to physical and metaphorical safety from (the underlying threat of) patriarchy (Kenney 24; Rosenfeld and Noterman 1351). One example is Take Back the Night (TBTN) women’s collective marches that have been occurring around the world for a number of decades in response to the socio-spatial “violence and fear [women] face on a regular basis” (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1351); the TBTN march draws attention to forms and, notably, spaces of gendered and sexual violence, such as “the red-light district and city parks” (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1351). With actions like TBTN, women are, as Heather Rosenfeld and Elsa Noterman describe, reclaiming public space by “decisively walking in streets socially decreed unsafe [...] and refusing to participate in their own erasure from the landscape” (1352). Rosenfeld and Noterman go on to suggest that controversy over whether or not the march should be a women-only event, by excluding men for the sake of unity, signals the complexity and slipperiness involved in creating safe space (1352); that is, safe spaces “provide important sources of support, but at the same time create their own internal boundaries that have important ramifications for notions of safety and solidarity” (Rosenfeld and

Noterman 1352).<sup>7</sup> This signals the contradictory relations operating in safe space around the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion; it can be argued that the very conditions of exclusion—strict boundaries and a kind of refusal—may actually perpetuate gender (and class and race) divisions in public spaces (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1352). The contradictory relations of safe space is an idea that I circle back to in my review of the literature. Nevertheless, safety, as situated in this particular context, is connected to empowerment and solidarity in spaces that challenge experienced (and imagined) fear and violence. In the following discussion, I think through safe space as a concept that permeates education in similar ways.

Safe space has become a widely used concept in pedagogical communities (Barrett 1-2; Boostrom 397; Holley and Steiner 50-1; Ludlow 42; Rasmussen 136; Redmond 3-4; Rosenfeld and Noterman 1354; Short 31 “Queers”). In Canadian secondary schools, safety for every student is considered the ethical responsibility of teachers and other school professionals—safe space is not only possible, but required (OCT “Safety in Learning” 1; Rosenfeld and Noterman 1354; Short “Queers” 32). The Ontario College of Teachers, in March of 2016, emailed to its members an updated professional advisory entitled, “Safety in Learning Environments: A Shared Responsibility” intended to ‘remind’ teachers of their responsibility to ensure safe school spaces by “recognizing student vulnerability and acting to mitigate it” (“Safety in Learning” 1). Safety is a concept also pursued in Ontario as “worthy of policy intervention” (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 9). Ontario’s *Education Act*, including amendments introduced through the *Safe Schools Act*, *Keeping Our Kids Safe at School Act*, and the *Accepting Schools Act* set out teachers’ legal obligations with respect to their students’ safety. The *Accepting Schools Act*, for example, came

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<sup>7</sup> Another example is the longstanding conflict between trans- activists and organizers of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (MWMF); organizers have refused to allow trans women to attend the festival because of a ‘womyn-born-womyn-only’ policy (Nash 579). See Serano, particularly chapter 12, for an insightful discussion about the exclusion of trans women from ‘real’ women-only spaces.

into effect in 2012 to address issues of bullying in Ontario schools, requiring school boards in the province to foster a safe school climate that is accepting of all people, including people of any sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (*Accepting Schools Act* s. 1.3(1)). This legislation also calls for schools to support activities or organizations that promote awareness of gender identities, including student organized groups with the name gay-straight alliance (GSA)<sup>8</sup> (*Accepting Schools Act* s. 12). In the *Accepting Schools Act*, teachers are legally obligated to “provide pupils with a safe learning environment” (s. 300.0.1). The explicit appeal to safety in legislation and policy stresses the educator’s duty of care to provide for the safety of students (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 28). At the same time, safe space is not just something that happens upon students at the discretion of educators; young people are very much involved in these entanglements—as the youths’ narratives suggest.

The embeddedness of safety in day-to-day educative spaces is also notable. Indeed, safe space saturates everyday practices and procedures in and around schools, turning up in classroom rules, posters on display in hallways, the gyms, the machine shops, the cafeteria, visual arts, student groups, and the list goes on. Lynn Holley and Sue Steiner suggest the concept functions as a description for a school climate, specifically the safe space classroom, that “allows students to feel secure enough to take risks, honestly express their views, and share and explore their knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors” (50). They further note that safe space is concerned with “minimizing the injuries that students suffer [...] at the hands of the instructor, [and] at the hands of other students” when they take risks, are vulnerable, and “express their individuality” (Holley and Steiner 50). Likewise, Barbara Stengel and Lisa Weems indicate that many educators have adopted this concept to set up their classrooms as spaces where all students are free to “unravel,

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<sup>8</sup> Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) are extracurricular, student-led groups in high schools that aim to support and advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students (Fetner and Kush 114). The GSA acronym can also stand for groups with the name Gender & Sexuality Alliance or Gender & Sexuality Awareness.

build and rebuild knowledge” (507). In this sense, safety in schooling is characterized as being free from not only physical threat, but also psychological and emotional harm, including judgement and/or verbal intimidation (Holley and Steiner 50; Ludlow 42). As such, the element of protection tied to safe space in schools has a common thread with its earlier use in second wave feminist activism; that is, safe space is generally associated with the absence of discomfort, fear, and vulnerability in order to mitigate danger and (potential) harm (Holley and Steiner 50; Hunter 8-9; Rosenfeld and Noterman 1354). The implication is that safe educative spaces should ideally be stable, predictable, and controllable—a point of contention that I expand on in my review of the literature.

According to Rosenfeld and Noterman, the idea of safety “generally relies on an underlying threat of violence, particularly physical violence,” and safe spaces surface in response to particular socio-cultural problems or threats (1349). It has been suggested elsewhere that the pull toward safety rhetoric and security measures in schools is a reaction to an increasingly insecure world with a moral panic around violence and criminal acts, following school shootings<sup>9</sup> in the 1990s and after such events as 9/11 (Hackford-Peer 543; Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 31; Taylor et. al. “Every Teacher” 154).<sup>10</sup> Where growing concerns about extreme violence are ever-present in the social imaginary and educational landscape, models of school safety emphasize security and control—with metal detectors and student identification tags as ‘safety objects’ that affect the school day—while factors like compassion in schools go

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<sup>9</sup> In the late 1990s, there were school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado and W. R. Myers High School in Taber, Alberta (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 31; Taylor et. al. “Every Teacher” 154).

<sup>10</sup> Gated communities, for example, also arise out of this moral panic. As Wendy Brown suggests, gated communities offer the illusion of security and protection from trespass, exploitation, invasion, and attack, by upholding the myth that safety is inside the walls while crime and disorder exist on the exterior (20-5). Brown argues that walls serve a mainly theatrical function by means of “projecting power and efficaciousness that they do not and cannot actually exercise” (25; 32); that is, walls function symbolically more than anything. They act as a form of surveillance to keep out the would-be danger, the imagined threat of racialized and ethnic minorities, while also signifying hierarchical statuses in their separating task (W. Brown 19-20, 82).



unacknowledged (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 23, 31). When fear is invoked it follows that “safety is prescribed as remedy” (Stengel 525).

With this in mind, it is not surprising that conceptions of school safety have been primarily responsive rather than preventative (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 3). Ontario’s *Keeping Our Kids Safe at School Act* is an example of legislation that uses reactive language around safety; this law requires “all school staff to *report*, and those who work directly with students to *respond*, to incidents that happen in school [...] to make Ontario’s schools safer” (*Keeping Our Kids Safe* 1; emphasis in original). As such, notions of safety rooted in protecting students from violence highlight safety *from* over safety *for*—it is about managing and governing the school day by monitoring the actions of students in the name of safety (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 31). In spite of its discursive politics, the expansion and movement of safe space over the last few decades proves its flexibility and staying power. In the next section, I situate this research in the context of education in Ontario; I discuss the gendered organization of schooling and think through Ontario’s *Safe Schools Act* as another example of policy that appeals to safety.

### 1.5 Gender and Education in Ontario

To critically engage with gender in education, I call attention to the importance of place within this research because we are all profoundly shaped and affected by the places in which we live, work, play, and grow (Gruenewald 4); a critical engagement with place is especially important in a project that explores ‘space’ in the way that this one does. As for all social phenomena, they are to be understood in relation to the social context where they are found (Gruenewald 5). This section thinks through the intersections among schooling, gender, and safe space, specifically in Ontario schools where dialogue around gender and sexuality is shifting.

But first, I want to underline the dominant understanding of gender in education, which is that schools are institutions always already divided along gender lines (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 116-7). That is to say, the gendered organization of schooling is linear—things always have been and always will be this way—and natural—we are unable to see the possibilities for other ways of being and for doing things differently. In an attempt to grasp a greater awareness of these issues, I started asking questions. *What is the relationship between safe space discourse in education and actual school spaces that trans- youth move in and through?* I wonder whether school spaces are barriers to education, with washrooms, gym changing rooms, and classroom arrangements that separate students by exclusively male and female genders. I think about how educators, including myself at times, often operate on the assumption that only two genders exist; this particular way of thinking about gender gets reflected in traditions, lesson plans, administrative practices, and everyday dialogue in and around schools, as examples (Frohard-Dourlent 64). Looking back on my own student teaching experiences, I can say that I echo Gail Boldt’s observations from research conducted on gender and power dynamics in her own classroom, where it is “not difficult to find gender at work” (7).

In our social landscape where the processes of defining and categorizing are ubiquitous, there are limited scripts from which to adopt a gendered subject position (Butler “Gender Trouble” 172-3); the body is forced to bear a ‘male’ or ‘female’ gender and recognize it as a literal truth or core essence instead of a social construct (Butler “Gender Trouble” 172-3; Lorber 321-4). Since the compulsory gender binary is such a familiar part of daily life it appears natural and necessary, thus making it invisible and difficult to question (Kelly “Module Six Part 1”; Lorber 321-4). It establishes a certain hegemony or dominance over existing values and institutions in the exclusion of others (Lorber 324). Trans- bodies are those bodies that are often

excluded; not fitting neatly into a socially prescribed gender category results in being thought of, and talked about, as a ‘wrong body’ (Stone 230-1). Moreover, exclusion is based on the premise that certain ways of being gendered are more legitimate or human than others.

As Judith Butler outlines in *Gender Trouble*, “the mark of gender appears to qualify bodies as human bodies; the moment in which an infant becomes humanized is when the question, ‘is it a boy or girl?’ is answered” (142). The strict male-female framework leaves little room for gender blurring or ambiguity because “to call the frame into question is perhaps to lose something of one’s place in gender” (Butler “Gender Trouble” xi). Likewise, Judith Lorber suggests, individuals can “shift genders temporarily or permanently, but they must fit into the limited number of gender statuses their society recognizes” (323). As such, if we ‘fail’ to do gender ‘right,’ by provoking discomfort and unsettling gender norms, then our humanness is called into question (Butler “Gender Trouble” 40; Lorber 323). Those who transgress norms of gender and sexuality can encounter boundary policing, become positioned as taboo or unmentionable, be labelled aberrant, face violence and, ultimately, remain on the margins of intelligibility (Kelly “Module Six Part 1”; Lober 321). There is much work to be done for schooling is a powerful institutional agent in the deployment of the male-female gender binary that violates, harms, and diminishes (Kelly “Module Six Part 1”). As Donn Short observes in *“Don’t Be So Gay!”: Queers, Bullying, and Making Schools Safe*, it is often left to gender nonconforming students to articulate the ways that gender binary systems and heteronormativity “amount [...] to a form of oppression that threatens their safety” (116). The oppression of gender nonconforming youth raises the issue of safe space in schools.

Conversations about making schools safe have been unfolding in Ontario for over two decades. How safe school policies and regulations in Ontario conceive of safety, namely,

alongside bullying and extreme violence, have tended to flatten the concept and overlook the broader ideological context in which “the hegemony of gender practices and heteronormativity are regarded merely as ‘the way things are’” (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 116). Upon returning to office after the Ontario provincial election in 1999, the Mike Harris government fulfilled their promise to implement a zero-tolerance policy toward violence committed by students in schools with the *Safe Schools Act* (ref. in Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 32).<sup>11</sup> The *Safe Schools Act* came into effect in September of 2001, giving teachers and principals more authority to suspend and expel students; notably, there was no mention of how to make schools safe (or safer) for trans- or gender nonconforming students and, by extension, the act does not go into much detail about what it means by ‘safe’ (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 5, 36).

When reading the *Safe Schools Act*, and more recent legislation like the *Accepting Schools Act*, I notice the ease and frequency by which ‘safe’ is drawn upon; in my observation, the term is used, largely, as if every reader will understand its meaning (and purpose). As such, this research holds a critical lens up to discourse to read the inbetweeness; I take the gaps and slippages in safe school policies as an opportunity to open up the many meanings of safe space. Even though the concept operates in these documents in particular ways and with certain intentions, it might mean something very different to the youth that have navigated actual high school spaces. It is especially important to take into account the perspectives of trans- youth in light of emerging dialogue around gender and sexuality in Ontario classrooms.

In September of 2015, an updated Health and Physical Education curriculum was introduced in Ontario schools, having been revised for the first time since 1998 (Clark-Lepard

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<sup>11</sup> The promise of a zero-tolerance policy, it has been suggested, is attributable to the crisis-driven discourse of safety in schools throughout the 1990s—a moment in history characterized by a moral panic around escalating school violence, particularly gun violence (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 31-2, 36).

14). Not so long ago it was unthinkable for young people to learn about LGBTQ+<sup>12</sup> histories and lives in education (Tierney and Dilley 65). The grades 9-12 curriculum now has carefully planned course expectations and learning goals designed to reflect the evolving interests, needs, and experiences of today's youth, with topics to include gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, affection and pleasure—topics that teach “the living skills needed [for students] to develop resilience and a secure identity and sense of self” (“The Ontario Curriculum” 6); still, the revised curriculum was not met with total acceptance, but with tension and uncertainty across and among student, parent, and school communities and, in some cases, public outcry to protest the updated curriculum (Clark-Lepard 14; Stepan n.p.).<sup>13</sup>

Because this research is place-conscious, I take the efforts of Ontario's Ministry of Education to acknowledge diverse youth identities as an invitation to explore the intersections among schooling, gender, and safe space in this research. Schools are, in fact, changeable. At the same time, I realize that adding ‘queer content’ to the curriculum alone will not completely transform the hostile school climate that many trans- youth are brushing up against in their daily lives (Short “Don't be So Gay!” 14). Nevertheless, I suggest this productive unsettling in Ontario's educational landscape is a move toward a more compassionate and socially just pedagogy. In the discussion that follows, I review some of the relevant pedagogical literature that is curious about safe space, particularly as it relates to gender and education.

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<sup>12</sup> LGBTQ+ is the commonly used initialism for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer with the + sign indicating the many other sexual orientations and gender identities that exist, including, but not limited to: Two Spirit, Intersex, Pansexual, and Asexual.

<sup>13</sup> As a personal anecdote, in September of 2015 I came across a poster advertised by a parent-organized group in opposition to the revised Health and Physical Education curriculum in Ontario. The poster explicitly assumed the updated curriculum will teach ‘boys to be girls’ and promote anal sex. What this sort of rhetoric does is the work of homogenizing young peoples’ gendered and sexual specificities under the label of childhood innocence, thereby desexualizing them (Gilbert xii; Hackford-Peer 544). The imagining of compassionate and socially just pedagogy in this research values the relationship among the erotic, the body, and gender and sexuality in schooling.

## 1.6 Literature Review

Safe space rhetoric is embedded within and across various academic terrains—from earth sciences to social work—but most notably in education (Barrett 1; Hunter 7). There is a large and growing body of research in this field dealing with safety issues surrounding LGBTQ+ students in schools (Short “Queers” 32). With this in mind, I conducted a review of selected education-based texts to explore how safe space gets talked about by education scholars. The relevant pedagogical literature was approached by asking the following questions: *What are some claims, findings, and conclusions about safe space? What are some gaps in the literature?*

There are a number of scholars in education who are thinking through and writing about this curious thing called safe space (Barrett 1; Boostrom 397; Hunter 7; Ludlow 45; Payne and Smith 187; Rasmussen 135; Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 30; Stengel and Weems 506). The ordinary and everyday acceptance of safety as the bedrock of a certain kind of ‘protectionist’ education deserves unpacking given “the absence of a precise definition of what exactly safety entails” (Barrett 1; Hunter 7). As Robert Boostrom indicates, safe space is a commonly used phrase that remains, by and large, tacit and unexplored, especially in discussions about race, gender, sexuality, and difference in the classroom (407). Betty Barrett agrees, observing that the language of safety permeates discussions of teaching and learning, and yet a critical examination of safe space learning environments remains largely absent from scholarly discourse (1).

Boostrom’s work, in my view, has been foundational in expanding how safe space is conceived. A 1998 study by Boostrom takes up safe space as a popular metaphor used by educators to talk about classroom life (397-8). His observation of ‘safe space talk’ at the 1996 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) is telling; he recalls, “at no time did anyone explain what a safe space is, nor did anyone, panelist or member of the

audience, express any doubt that creating a safe space was indeed a desirable thing to do” (398). It may appear, he suggests, that the meaning of safe space is so obvious that it is self-explanatory, but the meaning is, in fact, not so clear-cut (Boostrum 398). To demonstrate, Boostrum performed a computer search of ‘safe space’ through the Educational Resources Center (ERIC) which yielded a variety of results, with research paper topics ranging from the removal of asbestos to safe swimming practices (399). Boostrum’s own research findings suggest safe space is a response to a deeply isolating and alienating world (404); namely, he finds that educators’ perceptions of safety confirm that classrooms are considered safe spaces of comfort and self-expression where both teachers and students refrain from criticism, judgment, and bias—there is a sense of connectedness in safety that frees us from isolation (404). Overall, Boostrum’s research is grounded in the view that the construction of such safe spaces for students, perhaps unintentionally, contradicts the role of the classroom as a space for critical thinking and dialogue. Boostrum, whose research on safe space still resonates almost two decades later, is worth quoting at length:

Understood as the avoidance of stress, the “safe space” metaphor drains from classroom life every impulse towards critical reflection. It’s one thing to say that students should not be laughed at for posing a question or for offering a wrong answer. It’s another to say that students must never be conscious of their own ignorance. It’s one thing to say that students should not be belittled for a personal preference or harassed because of an unpopular opinion. It’s another to say that students must never be asked why their preferences and opinions are different from those of others. It’s one thing to say that students should be capable of self-revelation. It’s another to say that they must always like what they see revealed. (406)

The unquestioned appeal to safe space in schools, as argued by Boostrum, can actually impede the intellectual development of young people by shielding them from the messy realities of the world (407). Boostrum goes on to express concern for interpretations of safe space predicated on the notion that the classroom should be predictable, censored, and avoid student vulnerability:

When everyone's voice is accepted and no one's voice can be criticized, then no one can grow [...] that we need to hear other voices to grow is certainly true, but we also need to be able to respond to those voices, to criticize them, to challenge them, to sharpen our own perspectives through the friction of dialogue. A person can learn, says Socrates, "if he is brave and does not tire of the search" (Plato, 81d). We have to be brave because along the way we are going to be "vulnerable and exposed"; we are going to encounter images that are "alienating and shocking." We are going to be very unsafe. (407)

Boostrum calls for a return to an older notion of teaching and learning, one that emerged out of a tradition of educational thought from Plato through Rousseau to Dewey (399). This older notion emphasizes that learning (and teaching) necessarily involves discomfort and vulnerability, but also the abandoning of ingrained ways of knowing in favour of seeing and doing things differently (399). For Boostrum, there is pedagogical value in critique and disagreement. Above all, Boostrum's research is foundational because it sheds light on the difficult task of tracing where the concept of 'safe space' might lead us.

For scholars Barrett, and Jeannie Ludlow, the notion of safe space, particularly the safe space classroom, also warrants careful consideration. Barrett's writings challenge the pervasive claim that safe space classrooms "promote student engagement and enhance academic outcomes" by noting the lack of qualitative studies that document the effectiveness of safe space in achieving these sorts of goals (2-3). The creation of a safe space in schools is not only assumed to be possible, Barrett suggests, "it is assumed to be the essential foundation upon which successful student learning is built" (3). With a similar stance to Boostrum, Barrett contends that safe space is counterproductive, inherently ambiguous, and by extension, impossible to achieve for students who are marginalized and oppressed (1). Barrett notes, drawing on Ludlow, that schools are microcosms of a broader culture characterized by "social norms, structures, and processes that differentially confer power and privilege upon individuals based on their social position" (Barrett 6; Ludlow 45). In this way, the classroom cannot simply



be understood as a community of equals, and thereby safe for all, because students enter the space with different layers and levels of power and privilege based on their social locations (Barrett 7; Ludlow 45). As Ludlow finds, in research on safe space in the feminist classroom, when educators invoke the language of safe space they are conveying two simultaneous meanings of safety to students: one meaning that sets up the classroom to be a space where students are “free to self-explore, self-regulate, and self-express,” and another, more covert meaning, which says safety is only relevant to certain ‘other’ disempowered students (44). For Ludlow, defining the classroom as safe for students for whom the outside world is largely decreed unsafe—a world with racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and heteronormativity—is problematic (45). Ludlow explains:

I have learned that I cannot offer my less privileged students—students of color, LGBTI students, students from poor families—safety, nor should I try. In fact, it is a function of my own privilege that I ever thought I could. It is only from privileged perspectives that neutral or safe environments are viable and from empowered positions that protecting others is possible. (45)

For Ludlow, safety is a privilege, particularly in the classroom, which foregrounds social differences and explicit and implicit hierarchies, and so making schools safe is somewhat contradictory. As Ludlow notes, therein lies the tension of the safe space classroom—to offer certain students the privilege of safety and self-expression means to also further the lack of safety that may be experienced by marginalized students (45-6); this tension gets particularly messy when students in positions of power and privilege are, as Barrett claims, “granted the safety to express homophobic, racist, sexist, or other derogatory remarks without challenge” (7). The line of dialogue around safe space as presented by Barrett and Ludlow raises the question of who schools are being made safe for. *Are safe school spaces straight and neatly gendered?*

Elizabeth Payne and Melissa Smith identify schooling as a site where young people learn about normative gender and, subsequently, learn to monitor and police gender transgressions (187). Their research complicates what they consider the “traditional bully/victim binary” in schools; they find that incidents where students target those who ‘fail’ to do their gender ‘right’ are not merely an issue of bullying, but rather a “learned mechanism for improving or affirming one’s *own* social status, and schools are participants in both teaching youth to use these tools and privileging some groups of kids over others” (189; emphasis in original). As such, an act of violence in school toward a gender nonconforming youth is an act of power and privilege, an act which “recreate[s] the heterosexist, sexist, homophobic, and transphobic characteristics of the larger culture” (Savage and Schanding 1); it is an act in distancing oneself from that which one is ‘not’. These are acts that happen far too often. On the bus ride home from school in Oakland, California in November of 2013, high school senior Sasha who identifies as agender—neither male nor female—was set on fire by another student for what their gender represents: fluidity, queerness, otherness (Dashka MM40; “Judith Butler”).<sup>14</sup> As Butler reminds us, panic, fear, and anxiety occur with the undoing of gender norms, where those who do not fit rigid gender codes have their humanness called into question because they reveal the disjuncture in all of our gender identities—identities which are porous and leaky and may never be fully sedimented (Butler “Undoing Gender” 206-7; Kelly “Module Six Part 1”).

What we may consider useful, then, is Payne and Smith’s more nuanced understanding of bullying in schools; conceptions of bullying should not be limited to discrete behavioural

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<sup>14</sup> This research does not intend to contain young trans- peoples’ school-based experiences within the ‘innocent victim/activist educator’ dichotomy that Kim Hackford-Peer unravels (541). As an alternative, I hope to contribute research that offers a more layered and robust understanding of their school-based lives—lives full of affirmation, acceptance, and pleasure but also of ambivalence, misrecognition, and precarity (Gilbert xxiv). Moreover, I do not presume a lack of safety in school for *every* trans- youth because discourses that rely on un-safety tend to constrain the possibilities for “imagining what safety might mean” (Hackford-Peer 543).

‘moments’ of peer-to-peer aggression by way of individual or family pathology but rather, they argue, for a broader view that “encompasses cultural systems of power—along lines of gender, class, race, and sexuality—[which] underlies the bullying discourse” (187). In other words, the harassment and violence that trans- youth are brushing up against in school spaces is tied to ideological factors and broader socially inscribed meanings around gender (Payne and Smith 187; Short “Don’t Be So Gay! 22-3). Short agrees, and adds that these acts of violence cannot be pinned down under the umbrella of bullying or find solution in the labelling of a classroom as safe—the larger cultural landscape must be implicated (“Don’t Be So Gay!” 21-3, 82). I am aware of the other literature that exists concerning the relationship among schooling, gender, and safe space as they relate to bullying;<sup>15</sup> however, this body of work will not be reviewed extensively here because it falls outside of the aim of this research.

What theorists Payne and Smith contribute to the literature is analysis of the gap between the intent and the actuality of safe space. This view is also best laid out by Short who conducted qualitative, ‘on the ground’ interviews with queer high school students and their allies in the Toronto area. During fieldwork, Short set out to explore “how queer students conceptualize their safety needs and how the schools may or may not be pursuing safety in the same way” (“Don’t Be So Gay!” 30). Short’s research uncovers a palpable distance between policy and day-to-day educative spaces, where legal ‘on the books’ conceptions of safe space do not reflect “the safety concerns of queer youth” (“Don’t Be So Gay!” 28). In fact, school spaces, as Short notes, are embedded with implicit codes of youth culture, which might actually hold more weight in how the school day is organized over formal policy or procedures (“Don’t Be So Gay!” 166). What Short’s findings suggest is that policies, while important and necessary, are not enough (“Don’t

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<sup>15</sup> For an insightful discussion of bullying, see Wendy Craig, Debra Peplar, and Julie Blais 465-477; Debbie Epstein and Richard Johnson 197-230; Jessica Fields, Laura Mamo, Jen Gilbert, and Nancy Lesko 80-83; Elizabeth Payne and Melissa Smith 1-36; Gerald Walton 131-144.

Be So Gay!” 14). Short notes, as do Payne and Smith, that safe school policies often fail to name, and critically engage with, the social injustices that underlie the harassment and violence that they monitor (Payne and Smith 188-9; Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 125). Indeed, efforts in schools to foster safety are often fraught with contradiction; this salient line of inquiry is also taken up by education scholar Mary Rasmussen.

Rasmussen is concerned with the “‘curious property’ of the ‘safe space’” in her research, which explores what safe spaces in schools are imagined to provide, that is, the “illusion of protection and inclusion” (135-6). What is telling is her discussion of ‘safety transfers’ that happen in New York City public schools, a procedure whereby a student is moved to another school on the grounds that their safety is being compromised at their existing school (136); one high school student interviewed by Rasmussen recalls a time when the notion of safe space was used to pressure a male-to-female transgender student to transfer schools (138). Rasmussen suggests this procedure—in the name of safety— “reflects [the] discomfort caused by the occupation of school space by transitioning students” (138). According to Rasmussen, the safety transfer intervention does little in terms of actually lessening threats to students’ safety or gender nonconforming identities (138-9). Moreover, Rasmussen’s findings conclude that safe space discourse can be co-opted to remove students from the school who do not fit neatly within the male-female gender binary “under the guise of providing for their safety” (138). What are not addressed by these types of safety procedures are particular students’ conceptions of what makes them feel safe—trans- students are not involved in deciding. Overall, Rasmussen’s research highlights the absences, inversions, and paradox of safe space in the context of schooling (136).

Other scholars like Rosenfeld and Noterman, and Stengel and Weems, have also questioned how such a contradictory and muddled term has gained such prominence in

education. Rosenfeld and Noterman examine the paradoxical nature of safe space—as simultaneously safe and unsafe, inclusive and exclusive, separatist and integrated (1346-7); the concept, along this line of thought, straddles many boundaries. They go on to suggest safe space is tied together with, and crosses over into, that which it tries to detach from—corporeal harm, discomfort, fear, and vulnerability; this echoes my earlier discussion of safe space as a concept that emerged in schools alongside the crisis-driven discourse of safety in the 1990s (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1361; Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 31-2, 36). What their research underlines is the partiality and incompleteness of safe space; that is, *completely* safe school spaces are non-existent according to Rosenfeld and Noterman because no space can ever be entirely safe in a culture characterized by insecurity (1354-5, 1362). The idea that safe educative spaces are not simple, or entirely effective, can be linked back to the origins of ‘safe spaces’ within feminist, queer, and civil rights activism (Kenney 24); namely, safe space may never fulfill its promise, precisely because internal boundaries can occur within such spaces, which keep out certain bodies—or, as in the case of ‘safety transfers,’ pressure those bodies to transfer schools (Rasmussen 138; Rosenfeld and Noterman 1352). For Rosenfeld and Noterman, the work of cultivating safe space, then, is forever unfinished (1362).

There is much to say about the multiple and contradictory ways that safe space operates. Like Rosenfeld and Noterman, Stengel and Weems find that educational space is always already unsafe to some degree (Stengel and Weems 506-7). This way of thinking about safe space, Stengel and Weems suggest, might be a good starting point for embracing its “contested and ambiguous discursive terrain” (507). Even though Stengel and Weems claim that safe space is paradoxical they are careful not to imply that safe space is impossible or undesirable as a pedagogical tool (Stengel and Weems 506; Stengel 539). Advocates of such safe spaces, like

Mary Hunter, find they allow “individuals in a collective environment [to] be empowered to encounter risk on their own terms” (18-9). For Hunter, who researches in the context of the dramatic arts classroom, safe space is “a euphemism for the processual act of ever-becoming, of messy negotiations” (16). Following Hunter’s cue, we might say that teaching and learning in safe space is “necessarily dangerous” and messy (18-9). Focusing on the double-edged nature of safe space, scholars Rosenfeld and Noterman, and Stengel and Weems discover the work of making schools safe can be both limited and promising—a double edge that also emerges in the youths’ narratives.

My review of the literature suggests safe space is a familiar, albeit taken-for-granted concept in schooling. In summary, the ways in which these education scholars individually and collectively talk about safe space align with a range of other conceptions—ideas of comfort, freedom, control and protection are common (and competing) threads that weave through the dialogue around safety in the pedagogical literature. While the education-based texts that I have reviewed here cover important and necessary avenues of inquiry, some gaps in the literature exist. As Short notes, there is still room within pedagogical literature for research that reports on young queer peoples’ school-based accounts of safe space (“Don’t Be So Gay!” 109, 114). Much has been written about meanings of safe space from an educator’s perspective, such as *The Every Teacher Project*, however, little is available that considers meanings of safe space from the perspectives of trans- youth (Taylor et. al. “Every Teacher” 148-9). My review of the literature also finds that studies engaged with the perspectives of trans- youth often group gender identities under ‘queer’ or in the initialism ‘LGBT’ and so their experiences often get conflated with, or hidden behind, those of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth in research.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> I also acknowledge the potential benefits of belonging within a queer and/or LGBT collective in research (Browne and Lim 628).

My research enters the literature with a qualitative study that focuses on the narratives of trans-identified and non-binary youth specifically to draw out their unique perspectives. This project is also situated in the Canadian context; to my knowledge, there are very few Canadian studies that explore trans- youths' school-based understandings of safe space. Above all, I tease out the youths' meanings around, and experiences of, safe space to extend (and add to) the dialogue of scholars who write with an interest in safe space as the actual stuff worth investigating, rather than treating safe space only as an afterthought or backdrop.

### 1.7 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I introduced the research by outlining its significance, along with my research question and goal. I also included a (brief) history of safe space and then *placed* this research in Ontario with discussion of the context in which I researched. Lastly, I laid out a review of some of the relevant education-based literature to explore how safe space gets talked about by education scholars. In the next chapter, Chapter 2, I turn to a discussion of the theory that grounds this research: geographies of sexualities and trans- geographies.

## Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I present the theoretical framework that grounds my exploration of safe space. Using a sociological lens, I weave insights drawn from geographies of sexualities and trans- geographies, together with Doreen Massey's formulation of the politics of space. In particular, I focus on scholars that critically examine how gender and sexual<sup>17</sup> identities are bound up with socially constituted space. This chapter begins by outlining Massey's formulation of the politics of space, which untangles space from traditional notions of its fixity and stillness to instead inspire the concept with ideas of changeability and relationality. Then, I bring in Butler's theorizing of vulnerability—Butler's ethics of vulnerability offers an interesting angle from which to consider space as it relates to safety and schooling. Next, I discuss the contribution of geographies of sexualities to understandings of sexuality and gender in space. After that, I describe how a trans- approach to spatial analysis might fill in some of the gaps of early geographical studies of sexuality that focused primarily on lesbian and gay lives (Browne and Lim 618). The aim of this chapter is to map out ideas from each of these areas of work to develop a framework for analysis—a more nuanced conceptualization of space.

This study was undertaken with a consideration of 'space' as meaning physical space, like technical square feet of floor space, but beyond that, space here is of more than just practical interest, it is explored as, following Massey, "one of the axes along which we experience and conceptualize the world" ("Politics" 67); namely, the spatial is inevitably also social (Massey "Politics" 80). The narratives of interview partners in this research highlight the intricate and knotty layers of social relations that are practiced, regulated, and contested in school spaces. As such, this research is mindful of the intersections among bodies, experience, and discourse and

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<sup>17</sup> I do not intend to conflate gender with sexuality, although the two are interrelated; rather, my position aligns with Butler's writings, which untangle the causal relationship between gender and sexuality and yet do not address either gender or sexuality in isolation ("Gender Trouble" 170-2).



their broader connection to the material spaces that we move in and through in our daily lives (Threadgold 42). I take this chapter to consider the relationship between the discursive (conceptual meaning of space) and the material (actual spaces that bodies inhabit).

## 2.1 The Politics of Space

To begin the chapter I turn to geographer Massey who best articulates an alternative way of understanding space that fits well with this research. Massey insists on the importance of engaging with space as a socio-political concept, especially when “space is on the agenda,” cited in writings from Berger through Jameson to Laclau and Foucault (“Politics” 65). At the center of discussion both inside and outside the discipline of geography, space has been mainly relegated to the fixed and the static and, along Foucault’s line of thought, “to the realm of the already-given” (Massey “Concepts” 17).<sup>18</sup> In modernist discourses, Massey notes, the much-used term has been divided and tied down by ordered and distinctly bound places (“Politics” 66). Space is a discrete and motionless location, setting, site, spot—Pattaya is *there*, Canada is *here*, within this boundary on the map—and so there tends to be a sense of restrictedness and permanency to space. Massey goes on to summarize, and subsequently critique, Jameson and Laclau’s view of space, which decouples the concept from time and thus “deprives the spatial of any meaningful politics” (“Politics” 67). This conceptualization of space moves it to the realm of stasis, as a kind of closure, somehow operating as the backdrop to political action (Massey “Politics” 67). Time possesses a disruptive power associated with change, progress, and revolution, whereas space is considered the utter lack of movement, the “dimension *without* temporality (hence, the fixed and the dead)” (Massey “Concepts” 17; emphasis in original).

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<sup>18</sup> See Michel Foucault and Jay Miskowiec 22-27.

What Massey's theorizing does is rescue the spatial from its position as the negative dichotomous opposite of temporality ("Concepts" 17). To shake things up, Massey considers space, like time, as a living concept, a fluid and ever-changing entity that is dynamic and importantly, enables possibility ("Concepts" 17-8). Space is not simply a blank surface over which time happens, but instead has emergent powers that "can alter the future course of the very histories that have produced it" (Massey "Politics" 84). In fact, Massey insists on the inseparability of space and time, by suggesting they jointly affect social phenomena and thus we might be better served by thinking in terms of space-time ("Politics" 84); namely, space flows together with time to shape present meaning and experience (Massey "Politics" 84). From there, Massey maps out other and new ways of thinking about spatiality; she offers a triad of characteristics for a reconceptualisation of space that (1) is the product of relations; (2) allows for multiplicity and plurality; and (3) is always under construction ("Concepts" 17). I want to further unpack this reconceptualisation because it lays out a useful foundation from which to explore space in this research.

Central to Massey's formulation is the emphasis on space as relational; that is, space is context-specific and hosts particular interactions between individuals ("For Space" 10-1). "Space," Massey writes, "is a complexity of networks, links, exchanges, connections from the intimate level of our daily lives (think of spatial relations within the home for example) to the global level of financial corporations" ("Concepts" 16-7). In this way, spaces are more than physical surfaces, indeed they are "products of relation-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices" (Massey "For Space" 9). Space is therefore constantly being produced—in no fixed direction—through our actions and interactions (or refusal of interaction) with one another across social conditions, identities, differences, and histories (Massey

“Concepts” 17). For Massey, space is constantly being made in its role as the ongoing product of relationships and exchanges (“Concepts” 18). Massey explains:

[Space] is always under construction [...] There are always relations which are still to be made, or unmade, or re-made. In this sense, space is a product of our on-going world. And in this sense it is also always open to the future. And, in consequence, it is always open also to the political. The production of space is a social and political task. If it is conceptualised in this manner, the dimension of space enters, necessarily, into the political (for if the future were not open there would be no possibility of changing it and thus no possibility of politics). (“Concepts” 17)

It follows that interactions or encounters in space are not neutral, but rather imbued with power relations that impact our movements through, and occupations of, space—what Massey calls ‘power-geometries’ (“Concepts” 19-20). As Massey suggests, power-geometries can be a tool used to draw attention to social inequalities but also “to imagine, and maybe to begin to build, more equal and democratic societies” (“Concepts” 19). As such, relational and ever-becoming space reminds us of our responsibilities to one another, and the challenges and pleasures of co-existing—Massey asks “how are we going to live together?” (“Concepts” 18); this question haunts the spaces of schooling where students and school professionals—with unique and varying needs, interests, opportunities, and abilities—are brushing up against each other.

In the final part of *For Space*, Massey writes about an imagining of space as “the simultaneity of stories so far” to capture its multiplicity, interconnectedness, and vitality as the here and now (142); to understand space as the simultaneity of peoples’ very different stories is not to equate space with narrative, but to recognize space as an intersection of trajectories, a kind of contact zone of unfinished and never closed stories. In conceiving of space in such a way, Massey is able to shift space from associations with stasis and closure to associations of openness and possibility—indeed space establishes the possibility for a host of different stories to run alongside one another. For Massey, space is not fixed, space *becomes*. Space is created

and being constantly recreated. Space changes depending on interactions in, and ownership of, space, and who moves in and through space. Spaces *do* things; and yet, to mark space as ‘safe’ implies its fixity and stillness—safe spaces are predictable and protected, *right?* Following Massey, however, there is no certainty to space; its fixity and/or stillness can never be guaranteed because space is constantly fluctuating according to the bodies and time (context) with which it interacts (“Concepts” 16-7). Entering with this multiple, unstable, and always in flux sense of space allows this research to unsettle normative arrangements of space, and pose difficult questions such as *what and who is valued?* I also draw on Massey’s formulation to challenge the idea that space is a static surface upon which safety smoothly and evenly operates. To elaborate on this point, I bring in Butler’s ethics of vulnerability as a theoretical entryway for making sense of space as it relates to safeness and schooling.

The Butlerian ethics of vulnerability suggests that humans—embodied and necessarily orientated in the world—live in a general state of fragility and vulnerability (“Precarious Life” 147-8). We are affected by, and at the mercy of, others in all kinds of ways, even in our daily lives—with hospital visits, car accidents, school shootings, and wars (Butler “Precarious Life” 150; Stauffer “Interview”). As such, vulnerability lends itself to spatial analysis because it is the anchor to which we are all attached during our movements through, and encounters in, social space. What Butler’s theorizing illustrates is that we are products of particular spaces, which, as I have shown, are situated, contradictory, unpredictable, and messy, and so it follows that every person is always already a permeable and penetrable being (“Precarious Life” 145-6). Jen Gilbert agrees, and extends this dialogue in *Sexuality in School: The Limits of Education* to student life, underlining “the ordinary fragility of the LGBTQ subject [...] always already compromised” (xxv). Much of the education policy on safe space assumes that safe space can be fully realized.

*Does safe space rhetoric, then, rely on the vulnerability of certain individuals? Is safe space a constant working towards?* These sorts of questions underscore my theoretical framework.

Our social world, as Butler indicates, is so quick to foreclose moments of vulnerability (i.e. grieving and loss) in favour of an alternative stance, which seeks to establish impermeability through control of the environment (“Precarious Life” 147; Stauffer “Interview”). As mentioned previously, efforts to foster safe space in schools—via security and control—arise out of a moral panic to ‘protect’ students who, perhaps, cannot be *entirely* protected, precisely because, along Butler’s line of thought, we are all always vulnerable (Butler “Precarious Life” 147; Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 31); and, by extension, no amount of security and control of the school environment can make school spaces *completely* safe because space is imperfect—and thus penetrable—and, drawing on Massey, changeable and relational (“For Space” 10-1). I am of the same view as Butler who suggests that if we live from the standpoint of recognizing our shared vulnerability, by embracing our vulnerability to others and susceptibility to being wounded, then we may be better able to connect with and to support one another across differences (Stauffer “Interview”; Kelly “Module Six Part 1”). Above all, Butler’s ethics of vulnerability enables me to bring a fresh analysis to the phenomenon of safe space. In the subsequent parts of this chapter, I turn to geographies of sexualities and trans- geographies to further engage with space.

## 2.2 Geographies of Sexualities

The theoretical framework for this research is shaped, in part, by geographies of sexualities,<sup>19</sup> which situate space and sexuality as interconnected (Bell and Valentine 4; Johnston and Longhurst 3-4). This sub-discipline within geography started to take shape in the 1980s, with

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<sup>19</sup> Since the beginnings of geographical work on sexuality, a range of terms have been used to describe this field, including, but not limited to: ‘sexuality and space’ and ‘queer geographies’ (Oswin 113). I follow Natalie Oswin who uses ‘geographies of sexualities’ because it “alludes to the variety of sexual subjectivities and spatial experiences while capturing work informed by both ‘queer’ and other conceptual approaches” (113).

studies that critically examine the construction and performance of sexuality, gender, identity, and space (Bell and Valentine 4, 8; Browne “Challenging” 885; G. Brown et. al. 5). By the 1990s, scholars were drawing from feminist geography<sup>20</sup> and queer theory<sup>21</sup> to explore the spatial experiences of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and transgender (Bell 83; Bell and Valentine 2; Kenney 1-2; Puar et. al. 383). Bell describes the shift in the discipline:

The mid-1990s were an exciting time, even - or maybe especially - in geography. The porosity of the discipline, its magpie-like ability to pick things from elsewhere and put them to (usually) productive use, was in full flow. The so-called cultural turn in geography and the so-called spatial turn in the social sciences had both made geography ‘sexy.’ (83)

Moving away from previous geographical methods that simply described and mapped sexual differences in particular places, a handful of geographers collectively began to consider how sexual categories and identities “come to *take and make place*” (Oswin 106; emphasis in original). With a feminist and queer sensibility, geographers of sexuality have extended spatial analysis to interrogate “the power relations and the discursive and material processes that underlay the simultaneous production of space and sexualities” (Puar et. al. 384). In other words, geographers explore the relationship between power and language and their combined role in the shaping of identities and the making of space. As Sandra Schmidt notes, geographers understand that “space can never be voided of meaning and materiality” (271).

Early studies on sexuality and space focused on mapping the social scene in the cities and neighborhoods of those who fell outside of the heterosexual norm, particularly lesbians and gay men (Puar et. al. 384); some examples are Sy Adler and Johanna Brenner’s study of lesbians and

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<sup>20</sup> See Linda McDowell, especially chapters 1 and 2, for an insightful discussion of feminist geography.

<sup>21</sup> Annamarie Jagose describes the project of queer theory: “[Queer theory] locates and exploits the incoherencies [between sex, gender, and sexual desire] which stabilise heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any ‘natural’ sexuality, it calls into question even such unproblematic terms as ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (3). For a concise introduction to queer theory, see Jagose, particularly chapters 1 and 7.

gay men in the city, David Bell and Gill Valentine's study of rural lesbian and gay lives, and Gill Valentine's independent research on the production of lesbian landscapes (Adler and Brenner 27; Bell and Valentine "Queer Country" 113; Valentine 96). These studies highlight how geography can be used as a lens through which to understand "'social difference' [as] centrally shaped by and reflected in space" (De Montigny and Podmore 299). Early research by geographers of sexuality also succeeded in drawing attention to the implications of the heteronormativity of everyday spaces (Bell and Valentine 16-7; G. Brown et. al. 2-4; Puar et. al. 384). More recent topics covered in the literature range from gay tourism to the globalization of sexuality through to HIV and AIDS (Binnie and Valentine 177-80; Johnston and Longhurst 4; Oswin 110-1; Puar et. al. 384-5). In general, geographers of sexuality accept that what we do (and who we are) affects the ways in which we interact with, and live in, space, just as the spaces we inhabit provide an active context that affects our actions and identities (Bell and Valentine 8; G. Brown et. al. 4; Johnston and Longhurst 3-4; Oswin 106).

Bell and Valentine's foundational anthology, *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexualities*, was one of the first recognized overviews of the field, and one that widened the conceptual landscape of sexuality and space to map the geographies of bisexuality, gay villages and gentrification, and butch-femme identities, as examples ("Mapping Desire" 37, 59, 144). In an effort to put sexualities on the map, Bell and Valentine address what they term 'landscapes of desire,' which are spaces where "sexual acts and identities are performed and consummated" ("Mapping Desire" 1, 4); that is, they use geography to map, and thus foreground, primarily gay and lesbian experiences in space by exploring the ways in which "the spatial and the sexual constitute one another" across contemporary social terrain (Bell and Valentine "Mapping Desire"

2). This way of engaging with sexuality and space marked the geographers' cultural turn to queer theory (Bell 83; Oswin 107-8).

Bell and Valentine draw on Kosofsky Sedgwick's formulation of 'queer reading' and apply it to geography; "a queer reading of geography," they contend, "should function to resist the ways in which geographical knowledge is constituted (for example, as pre-discursively heteronormative) by hybridising and retheorising" ("Mapping Desire" 16). The anthology's chapters, as Bell and Valentine describe them, take up this challenge to *retheorise*; together they "reveal that [the] heterosexing of space is a performative act naturalised through repetition" (Bell and Valentine "Mapping Desire" 16). Following Butler, as Bell and Valentine do here, my theoretical stance is mindful of the role of performativity and theatricality in the construction of the self, and space, as always already straight (Bell and Valentine "Mapping Desire" 17; Butler "Gender Trouble" 139-46); namely, heterosexuality is a regulatory fiction, an effect of discourse (Butler "Gender Trouble" 24, 136). Applying this idea to space, Bell and Valentine suggest that only through the repetition of hegemonic heterosexual scripts does space become straight and maintain straightness ("Mapping Desire" 17). There is a sense that space is naked—that any sexual identity can navigate through any space; however, space is bound to politics and therefore enters our spheres (or we enter it) with power dynamics and sexual and gender norms already at work, as Butler and Massey remind us (Butler "Gender Trouble" 172-3; Massey "Concepts" 19-20). It follows that certain expressions of identity are less acceptable in spaces precisely because space is produced, and has been produced, as heterosexual, heterosexist, and heteronormative (Bell and Valentine "Mapping Desire" 16; Johnston and Longhurst 85). As mentioned previously, the rigid gender binary system<sup>22</sup> is such a familiar part of daily life it appears natural

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<sup>22</sup> The 'rigid gender binary system' refers to the discursive practice of legitimizing only two genders (man and woman) and the social prescription for categories of 'male' and 'female' (Butler "Gender Trouble" 142).



and necessary (Butler “Gender Trouble” 142; Lorber 321-4). With the intention of taking apart the supposed neutrality of spaces—as prediscursively straight and neatly gendered—Bell and Valentine’s contribution to geographies of sexualities will form part of the theoretical underpinning of this research.

In another key overview of the field, *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices and Politics*, Gavin Brown, Kath Browne, and Jason Lim demonstrate that sexuality and gender cannot be understood without also understanding the actual spaces through which they are “constituted, practised, and lived” (4). While spaces exist under the guise of static heteronormative neatness, G. Brown and his collaborators suggest that norms regulating such spaces are not set in stone, but can be renegotiated by individuals that inhabit particular spaces (4); there are normative boundaries around sexuality and gender that determine what a body is *supposed* to do in any given space—the home, the workplace, a public washroom—but spaces are also always open for reworking (G. Brown et. al. 4-5); space is not simply a vessel or container in which things happen. Their line of inquiry echoes Bell and Valentine’s view that space, especially heteronormative space, can be “destabilised by the mere presence of invisibilised sexualities” (17; G. Brown et. al. 4-5). This consideration of sexuality and space, as performed and contextual, is noticeably an embracing of queer theory and its critique of stable and fixed identities (G. Brown et. al. 1; Oswin 107). What G. Brown et. al.’s edited collection underlines is how “spaces are *produced* through embodied social practices [...] that are historically and geographically specific” (2, 4; emphasis mine). Lynda Johnston and Robin Longhurst agree, and add that spaces are *made* in that we affect space precisely as space affects us—our social world is maintained and lived out spatially (4). These ideas open up the potentiality for doing things differently, by listening to, and prioritizing, stories about spatial

experiences from individuals whose stories (and identities) are often rendered invisible—I return to a discussion of storytelling in the next chapter.

Phil Hubbard reflects on how the rich body of work laid out by early geographers of sexuality makes it difficult to imagine “geography untouched by sexuality studies and queer theory” (640). In reference to Bell and Valentine’s *Mapping Desire* and G. Brown et. al.’s *Geographies of Sexualities*, Hubbard reviews the direction of the field, which overwhelmingly focuses on the ways that space is “produced as *either* heterosexual or homosexual, and consequently [fails] to acknowledge the diverse sexualities that may exist within these broad categories” (Hubbard 641; emphasis in original); in short, these categories are too simplistic. As an alternative, Hubbard invites those studying space to consider the intricacies and layers of identity when mapping sexual and gendered lives spatially—heteronormative assumptions about space must be reflected upon (641; Oswin 108). Hubbard’s discussion leads to a particular way of thinking about space, one that recognizes the impossibility of organizing space as either ‘straight’ or ‘gay’ because it ignores the diverse and overlapping desires and bodies that exist within different spaces at different times (642). This insight is particularly relevant for this research as it signals the complexities of space—it is a reminder to be careful not to take a given space or normative order for granted.

What I appreciate about scholars in this field is that they take space seriously. The theoretical framework for this research is thus informed by the cultural turn in geography that goes beyond “marking ‘dots on a map’” to instead examine “the multiple and fluid ways that [sexual and gender identities] are imagined, negotiated and contested” in socially constituted space (Binnie and Valentine 178; Oswin 106). Geographers of sexualities conceptualize space in a way that puts emphasis on the lived, material experiences of the everyday—how bodies are

affected by, and move in and through, social spaces (Binnie and Valentine 183). This research takes the insights and observations of geographers of sexualities into the study of school spaces.

At the same time, I recognize that early geographical studies of sexuality have been unevenly focused on lesbian and gay lives, thereby overlooking the wider range of sexualities and genders that are important for understanding the geographies of social life (Binnie and Valentine 176; Nash “Trans Geographies” 580; Oswin 107-8; Puar et. al. 384); however, there has been significant expansion in the field over the last decade, and the focus of analysis has shifted to cover gender more closely, hence the emergence of trans- geographies (Browne et. al. 573; Oswin 112). This approach to geography engages in the study of space that considers not only sexuality but also gender (Browne and Lim 616; Browne et. al. 573).

### 2.3 Trans- Geographies

Despite a call from geographers in the 1980s to study sexuality in the shaping of social life, gender has existed on the periphery of the geographical map (Browne et. al. 573; Nash “Trans Geographies” 582). It has been suggested that early studies on lesbian and gay geographies, as mentioned above, “perhaps had an uncritical all-embracing concept of lesbian and gay identity” (Binnie and Valentine 181). With reference to geographies of sexualities, and drawing from trans- scholarship, some geographers have directed their attention toward the relationship between gender and space, particularly to the spatial experiences of trans-identified individuals (Browne et. al. 573; De Montigny and Podmore 298-99; Nash “Trans Geographies” 579); some examples are Kath Browne and Jason Lim’s study of trans peoples’ relationships to the ‘Gay Capital’ of the UK, Petra Doan’s study of trans men’s and trans women’s perceptions of safety in urban space, and Alison Rooke’s empirical research on the creation of space for transgender youth through art (Browne and Lim 615; Doan “Safety” 22; Rooke 656). This body

of work has brought geographies of sexualities into dialogue with trans- geographies by showing that geographical inquiry has tended to straightforwardly, and uncritically, map gender onto biological sex (as either male or female) and sexuality (as falling on either one side or the other side of the heterosexual/homosexual binary) (Nash “Trans Geographies” 580-1). Kath Browne, Catherine Nash, and Sally Hines suggest this kind of geographical mapping has yet, with a few notable exceptions,<sup>23</sup> to engage with the experiences and lives of trans- people that productively unsettle such normative assumptions around sex, gender, and sexuality (573).

Petra Doan, whose research is one of the exceptions, applies a trans- approach to understanding space. Drawing on the work of feminist geographers who study the role of space in the exercise of gendered power, Doan explores the relationship between gendered divisions of space and trans- lives (“The Tyranny” 636). According to Doan, trans- people experience, what she calls, ‘the tyranny of gender’—the notion that only two coherent genders exist, male and female, and that they intrude on the everyday and constrain the allowed behaviours in social spaces (“The Tyranny” 635). In particular, Doan uses the method of autoethnography<sup>24</sup> to explore the profound ways this tyranny has affected her life, as a transgendered woman, and the lives of other gender variant people, including intersex<sup>25</sup> individuals. Along Doan’s line of thought, a trans- approach to geography explores the ways in which space is gendered and the real consequences of that gendering for those who do not fit neatly within the limited gender

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<sup>23</sup> The work of Kath Browne and Jason Lim 615-633; Petra Doan 22-25; Sally Hines 49-66; Viviane Namaste 584-60 (also see Namaste *Invisible Lives*); Alison Rooke 655-672 being notable exceptions.

<sup>24</sup> Autoethnography is a form of personal experience narrative that places the self within a broader social and cultural context through an, oftentimes revealing and evocative, turn inward (Ellis et. al. 274-5). Being rooted in the teller’s own experiences and perceptions, autoethnography tends to be idiosyncratic in form and content (Ellis et. al. 274).

<sup>25</sup> Intersex is described by interACT, an intersex youth advocacy group, as the following: “Intersex is an umbrella term describing people born with variations of internal and/or external sex anatomy resulting in bodies that can’t be classified as the typical male or female” (“What is Intersex?”). Some intersex individuals also self-identify as transgender, though not all (“What is Intersex?”).

categories available (“The Tyranny” 636). She goes on to suggest that how we identify and perform our gender can change (and even predict) how we navigate through space, just as space can change how we experience our gender—bodies and environments mutually produce one another (Doan “The Tyranny” 638). Doan’s analysis of space is useful for this research because it brings gender into geographical inquiry; her approach underlines the notion that gender colours our everyday relationships to space, especially for those who transition genders, the process of which, Doan suggests, is by no means private but rather “occur[s] in public space and provide[s] a different lens with which to view the gendering of public spaces” (“The Tyranny” 636, 640). For Doan, gender matters in spatial analysis.

Also using a trans- approach to geography, Catherine Nash studies trans men’s and trans women’s experiences—possibilities, limitations, and resistances—in Toronto’s lesbian and gay villages to explore how “spaces are implicated in the ability to live a legible life” (“Trans Experiences” 205). Nash’s research finds that fluid gendered and sexual practices can alter traditional gay and lesbian urban spaces, which are increasingly contradictory and contested social landscapes (“Trans Experiences” 193); that the visibility of trans men in Toronto’s gay village can challenge and rework that space echoes, and subsequently extends, the claim made by G. Brown and his collaborators: that spaces can be renegotiated (G. Browne et. al. 4; Nash “Trans Experiences” 205). As Alison Rooke notes, the reworking of *imagined* utopian spaces “open to ‘queer people’” is attributable to the presence of “the trans- body [which] clearly troubles the gender binaries that both heteronormativity and homonormativity rest upon” (668); namely, many lesbian and gay spaces, though often temporary, still depend on gendered logics

that uphold the normative male-female gender binary and thus monitor (and exclude) trans-bodies (Browne and Lim 625-6; Rooke 661).<sup>26</sup>

Because early research in geographies of sexualities primarily studied lesbian and gay lives, Nash asks those studying trans- peoples' experiences in and with space to tease apart what they mean by LGBT and/or queer spaces in order to get at the particularities—identities, relations, embodiments, and pleasures—in those spaces (“Trans Geographies” 584). Nash points out that trans- peoples' experiences often get grouped together with or lost behind the spatial experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer folks in geographical research, especially where gender is collapsed with sexuality (“Trans Geographies” 584-5). When gender does surface in the geographical literature it is often used to make distinctions between gay men's and lesbian women's experiences (Nash “Trans Geographies” 582).<sup>27</sup> What is often neglected in geographical inquiry is a complex and reflexive engagement with the socially situated, embodied materiality of trans- peoples' experiences and lives (Nash “Trans Geographies” 579; Rooke 666). Browne and Lim agree, and suggest the task for geographers is to understand the layers of marginalization that trans- people face, such as exclusion within particular lesbian and gay communities, and within heteronormative institutions more broadly (Browne and Lim 615; Doan 639). As such, Nash indicates that certain theorizations in trans- geographies can meet with, and trouble, geographies of sexualities, in productive ways (“Trans Experiences” 205).

Following the work of trans- geographers, this research takes seriously the spaces of schooling that separate students by exclusively male and female genders—with school office

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<sup>26</sup> For example, a trans-woman was denied access to the women's washroom during a gay pride celebration in London in 2008 where she was asked by security to show her gender recognition certificate as ‘proof’ of her female gender (Rooke 668).

<sup>27</sup> This research is not meant to establish some kind of lesbian and gay versus trans- people dichotomy (Browne and Lim 629). Following Browne and Lim, I acknowledge that those who identify as lesbian and gay are very much affected by multiple and intersecting exclusions in spaces (629).

forms that restrict gender options to ‘M’ (for male) or ‘F’ (for female), and washroom doors that display a pictogram of either a ‘man’ (with pants) or ‘woman’ (with skirt/dress). Spatial analysis, with a trans- approach, is a means for exploring how injustice is written into the educational landscape and the impact it has on the school day for trans-identified youth (Schmidt 254). From Rae Spoon and Ivan Coyote’s collaborative book *Gender Failure*, I borrow the paradigmatic linkage of gender with the notion of failure and apply it to the gendered organization of schooling which, in myriad ways, is *failing* trans- students (239). A trans- approach to geography is therefore relevant for this research because it reads space as a social text (Schmidt 257); it considers the failures, slippages, and the possibilities of material spaces through trans- peoples’ accounts of their own experiences and also thinks about trans- peoples’ lives as affected by the representational practices within the spaces they inhabit (Browne “Challenging” 891; Browne and Lim 617; Nash “Trans Experiences” 194; Rooke 666). As such, my theoretical stance draws on, and subsequently blends, conceptualizations of space from both trans- geographies and geographies of sexualities.

## 2.4 Chapter Summary

Within the space of this chapter, I marked out the potential for geographies of sexualities and trans- geographies, along with Massey’s formulation of the politics of space, to develop a theoretical framework for this research. Taken together, these areas of work lay out a more nuanced conceptualization of space, by building a critical awareness around it as an object worthy of study and as a useful theoretical tool for analysis (Puar et. al. 383). In the chapter that follows, Chapter 3, I present my research method/ology and design by discussing the process of data collection, the method of narrative inquiry, which I used to ‘move’ and analyze the data, and the researcher stance that I bring to this topic.

### Chapter 3: Research Method/ology and Design

In this chapter, I present my qualitative method/ological approach, including a description of, and explanation for, my research design choices. I discuss my data collection process by providing details around selection and recruitment, semi-structured interviewing, and transcription techniques. Next, I outline my chosen method of narrative inquiry for analyzing the data. Lastly, I talk about the researcher stance that I bring to bear on this topic.

The research concepts of methodology and method are intriguingly complex; the range of methodological positions and method choices employed in gender and feminist studies is broad and varied—a sign of the creativity and diversity among researchers teaching and learning in this field (Fonow and Cook 2214). The many ways for thinking through, and speaking about, methodology and method emphasize the need to carefully elucidate my own understanding of these concepts and their place within this research.

I understand method as a researcher’s tool for gathering and ‘moving’ data; in fact, there is an entire toolbox available to qualitative researchers, which contains an assortment of devices and techniques that can be used to collect data (Billo and Hiemstra 320; Fonow and Cook 2214). In my first year of graduate studies, I learned about qualitative research methods—different from quantitative<sup>28</sup>—which are typically used to draw out patterns and themes among the data that help to better understand the phenomena being studied (B. Brown 128; Fonow and Cook 2214-5). This research follows qualitative methods because I am more interested in prioritizing, and responding to, *what matters to trans- youth* so that research goals and outcomes are reflective of their voices and needs—I set out to understand social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved and affected.

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<sup>28</sup> Quantitative research generally focuses on “tests and statistics that give you what you need to predict and control phenomena” (B. Brown 128).



I understand the application of method as methodology; that is, method is the tool and methodology is how it gets applied. When I refer to methodology, I borrow from Margaret Fonow and Judith Cook's description of feminist methodology as a pathway to inquiry, which views the world through a critical lens, treats personal experience narratives as valuable, and involves reflexive engagement on the part of the researcher (2213); this approach considers the research process as equally important as 'end results' and moves beyond a singular or 'right' way of researching (Edwards and Holland 5; Richardson 962). I summarize my methodological position as arising out of a profound discomfort; discomfort is in the journey that led me to 'do' this particular research and is what motivates my urgency around this topic—a point I elaborate on in the discussion below.

### 3.1 Data Collection

The qualitative data gathered for this research were transcribed interviews with young trans-identified and non-binary individuals who have recently attended a public secondary school in Ontario. In this section, I explain my procedures for gathering the research data, by outlining the selection and recruitment of interview partners, the particular type of interview method that I used, including an outline of the topics and questions that guided the interviews, and lastly, my transcription techniques with a focus on accountability in research involving narratives.

#### 3.1.1 Selection and Recruitment of Interview Partners

The selection and recruitment of interview partners<sup>29</sup> took place over a time period of about four months, from late September of 2015 to December of that same year. Within those

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<sup>29</sup> From Christian Klesse's empirical study on polyamory, I borrow the term 'interview partner' to signal that knowledge production in qualitative interviews can be collaborative with the exchange of ideas flowing back and forth between researcher and interview partner; Klesse writes, "due to inherent connotations of differing degrees of

months, I conducted three, individual, semi-structured interviews with two trans-identified youth,<sup>30</sup> Evy and Sebastian, and Quinn, a youth who identifies their gender as non-binary. The interview partners were recent secondary school students, each having graduated from a publicly funded secondary school in Ontario within the last six years.<sup>31</sup> Interview partners were between the ages of 19 and 24 at the time of their interviews and were therefore, following Memorial University's ethical guidelines of research, at an age to provide informed consent.

It bears mentioning that I decided not to interview trans-identified youth who are currently attending secondary school for the reason that Memorial University's *Ethics of Research Involving Human Participants* considers persons younger than 19 years of age as minors; therefore, interviewing a high school-age youth requires written consent from their parent and/or legal guardian. This particular process of consent can be time consuming and may involve a youth having to disclose their gender identity to a parent and/or guardian when they are not able to do so for various reasons; this kind of negotiation can be messy, especially if home is a space of gender-related violence (G. Brown et. al. 3). For these reasons, I chose to interview young trans- individuals between the ages of 19 and 24 and with recent high school experiences to avoid issues related to practicality and confidentiality.

To recruit interview partners, I approached a student-led, LGBTQ+ resource centre at a large university in southern Ontario with the research description and my contact information;

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activity/passivity this aspect is not so well expressed in a terminology that distinguishes between interviewer and interviewee" (579).

<sup>30</sup> For the purposes of this study, I consider 'youth' as between the ages of 15 and 24 (Marshall 4); at the same time, I invite J. Jack Halberstam's notion of queer temporality into this research, which upsets straight (normative) Western adultist temporality that follows 'phases' of maturation from 'unruly' adolescence to (re)productive adulthood—an organization of life-time that revolves around biological family, private property, and capital accumulation, and implies that adults somehow hold power over young people based solely on age (153). Queer temporality rethinks the adult/youth binary to instead view age on a continuum and in doing so supports positive connections among people of differing ages; youth is not simply a discrete time in human experience that ends and is thus inaccessible to adults (Halberstam 2, 153).

<sup>31</sup> With permission, I share the high school graduation year of each interview partner: Evy: 2009, Quinn: 2014, and Sebastian: 2011.

they kindly posted the research details on their social media platforms. Along with that, I placed interview recruitment posters on message boards in several different faculty buildings across the university's campus (see Appendix C). Soon after, I received email inquiries from interested individuals, some wanting to know more about the research and others interested in participating in an individual interview. In working towards participation in research, which is both informed and voluntary, I responded to inquiries by providing an overview of the project, which covers what the research is about, what taking part in the study would involve, the benefits and risks involved, the ethical duty of confidentiality, rights to withdraw, who to approach to clarify issues pertaining to participation and so on (Clare 10; Miller and Boulton 2209; see Appendix A). When an individual willingly agreed to participate, they were asked for their written consent at the beginning of the interview.

To ensure the process of data collection was both achievable and efficient, I conceptualized the selection and recruitment of interview partners with two criteria in mind: accessibility and limitability (Foss and Waters 46-7). In thinking about accessibility, I considered resources like time, finances, and location, and decided to conduct interviews, which were more procedurally difficult and time consuming,<sup>32</sup> but fostered a rich source of data that aligned well with the research question and goal. To complete the recruitment process in a timely manner, I selected and interviewed individuals in the current province in which I live, so I did not have to travel great distances or at great expense to collect data.

The second criterion was limitability, which I considered while deciding on the number of individuals to interview; here, I navigated tensions around whether or not it is possible to draw

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<sup>32</sup> Interviewing can be a lengthy process over other relatively quick methods of data collection, such as locating public documents, which are easier to access. Conducting interviews often involves spending a considerable amount of time and resources on procedures like applying and waiting for approval of the university's human subjects review committee, identifying and locating willing individuals to interview, scheduling and conducting interviews, as well as transcribing (Foss and Waters 51).

meaningful insights from a ‘small sample’ and issues with over-collecting data, which can result in superficial, abstract generalizations in the analysis stage because of trying to fit in and explain so many pieces of information in the findings (Foss and Waters 48). A study from the National Centre for Research Methods reviewed the advice of noted qualitative interview methodologists on the question of ‘how many qualitative interviews is enough?’ and found the recurring answer is, ‘it depends’ (Baker and Edwards 6); that is, the number of interviews is dependent on the nature and design of the study and the methodological stance of the researcher (Edwards and Holland 5). The focus of the objectives and of analysis in this research is on drawing out the nuances and intricacies in each particular narrative; I am not trying to make sweeping sociological conclusions or universalizing claims about *entire* communities (Clare 7). In fact, I follow the advice of Margaret Foss and Judith Waters who suggest “analysis of the data, not the amount of data collected, determines the originality and significance of [the] study” (47-8).

### 3.1.2 Semi-structured Interviews

The method that I chose to gather research data was individual, semi-structured interviews. The interviews each lasted approximately 60 minutes, were audio recorded, and then stored in a secure file on my personal computer;<sup>33</sup> the audio recordings were accessed by me at a later date for transcription—the techniques of which I describe in the next section. I have selected this type of interview method because it is well suited for gathering the information needed to answer the research question; Rosalind Edwards and Janet Holland suggest the semi-structured interview can provide a useful platform for learning about: (1) the texture and weave

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<sup>33</sup> Each interview recording was confidentially stored on my personal computer for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University’s policy on *Integrity in Scholarly Research*, after which all recordings will be destroyed.

of everyday life; (2) understandings, experiences, and imaginings of research participants; and (3) meanings of social processes and discourses (90-1).

I understand the semi-structured interview as an interactional, teaching and learning event (Edwards and Holland 3); to elaborate, semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity for the sharing of information to occur between individuals in a conversational and collaborative way. I consider collaboration in research interviews as a working together between researcher and interview partner to exchange, question, and create ideas and share knowledge, in this case, around a particular phenomenon. In this research, I approached each interview with guiding topics and questions to prompt discussion, but other areas of interest emerged and flourished through dialogue. I relied mostly on the flow of interaction to steer each interview because, as mentioned, this research prioritizes *what matters to trans- youth* over a formal, strict line of questioning or the linear transferring of knowledge from ‘interviewee’ (vessel) to ‘interviewer’ (all-knowing). Sarah Elwood and Deborah Martin suggest the interview site itself produces, what they call ‘micro-geographies’ of social relations and meanings, which reflect the relationship of the researcher with the participant, the participant with the site, and the site within a broader socio-cultural dynamic (649, 650). Likewise, Edwards and Holland suggest research interview situations are entwined with asymmetries of power where social divisions and hierarchies around gender, race, socioeconomic status, ability, age and other aspects of social status can influence and be traced in the interview interaction (78-9); that the interview site is analytically significant, with all its messiness and social embeddedness, is a reminder of how “space matters and affects us” (Elwood and Martin 656). In an effort to negotiate these power dynamics, I attempted to shift the interviewing practice away from the researcher as somehow ‘controlling’ the interview site; this shift is especially important in this project where space is considered malleable and my

researcher stance is an alliance-based one (more on this below). I also recognize that there are certain requirements in research with interviews that make challenging power relations in interview settings difficult—that the researcher already enters the interaction with clearly defined goals for the research is an example of this (Edwards and Holland 17). As such, I followed the preference of each interview partner around *when* and *where* to meet for the interview. As well, with each interview partner, I explained my interview practice as being informal, flexible, and conversational-style instead of a question-answer exchange so that teaching and learning could happen in a circular and reciprocal way.

In the case of developing interview topics and questions—I attended a youth panel on ‘LGBTQ inclusion’ entitled, “Invisible Youth: Stories 2015 K-12” in St. John’s, Newfoundland where I lived during my first year of graduate studies; the event poster intrigued me with a subheading that read “Safe Schools = Safe Communities.” At this event, held in March of 2015, two trans-identified youth and one cis-gender<sup>34</sup> youth bravely shared their school-based experiences of homophobia and transphobia. The insights that I gained from listening to these youths’ stories helped to shape the topics and questions for this research. The interview guide was divided into five general topics: (1) Identity (with respect to intersectionality); (2) Information about your high school; (3) Meaning(s) of safe space; (4) Experience(s) of safe space; and (5) Negotiation(s) of safe space (see Appendix B). When deciding on interview questions, I reflected on the research focus, which is to explore the meanings around, and experiences of, safe space from the perspectives of trans-identified and non-binary youth. As such, the questions were meant to identify attachments, expectations, gaps, failures, and the possibilities of safe space in schools, as examples; I asked questions like, “How do you

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<sup>34</sup> In the case of gender, ‘cis’ refers to a person whose gender identity aligns with their sex assigned at birth (Serano 161).

understand safe space?” and descriptive-type prompts, such as “Describe a space from your high school that you considered a safe space” (see Appendix B).

In terms of confidentiality in research with interviews, I aimed—to the best of my ability—to safeguard participants’ identities and personal information from unauthorized access, use, or disclosure; for instance, I carefully removed all dialogue from transcribed interviews that could lead to identification of interview partners. If interview partners wished to remain anonymous they had the option of selecting a pseudonym to be used in direct quotations from their interviews; however, it is possible that, despite the use of a pseudonym for direct quotations, other members from the university community might be able to identify which quotations belong to certain interview partners based on what they have said. I also want to note that interview partners could stop and/or end their participation in the research during the interview and without consequence. Participants could withdraw from the research after data collection had ended up to the date of February 1 of 2016. The data collected (e.g. interview recordings, transcripts) up to that point would be destroyed and not used in this thesis, Department of Gender Studies Speakers’ Series, and/or any future publications or presentations. After the date of February 1 of 2016, the data could not be removed because it was being transcribed and prepared for analysis.

### 3.1.3 Transcription

Because I audio recorded the interviews (with informed consent), I was able to transcribe the narratives verbatim, to mark tone and pauses—the ways people say what they say (Edwards and Holland 71). By indicating the verbal complexities in each narrative, I hoped the details and textures from the tellings would come through in the transcriptions. For instance, I used an ellipsis (...) to indicate pauses, a dash (–) to point out a shift in topic/thought/idea, and italicized

(*italicize*) words to signal vocal variety; these techniques, and others, are meant to mark the ebb and flow of the interview dialogue. The following is an example from Quinn's transcribed interview:

I'm a lot more *open* [laughter] now than I was in high school. Um, uh, the high school I went to was very conservative so, um... It was difficult to be anything that was not like... the norm, so to say.

I performed three phases of transcription: (1) rough transcription, where I moved the words on to paper; (2) a more polished version that incorporated notes on pauses, silences, laughter, and vocal inflections; and (3) an edited version after the first follow-up with interview participants. In the first follow-up, I emailed the transcribed interview document to the corresponding interview partner so they could add to and/or subtract from what they had said in their interview. A second in-person and/or email follow-up took place after I analyzed the data so that I could be *accountable* to their stories, a point emphasized in Eli Clare's public lecture that I attended in October of 2015 entitled, "The Politics of Story" (10-1). Accountability, as part of the politics of story using, should involve, according to Clare, "permission throughout the [research] process" (10); for instance, accountability is more than just having signatures on a consent form (Clare 10). As such, the follow-ups allow the interview partners to find out what I have done with their words. This commitment serves as a reminder to treat their experiences with care and respect the risk it takes to be vulnerable and tell one's story (Clare 4). By involving the interview partners at different stages of the writing process, I can try to represent their perspectives as accurately as possible, while still recognizing the impossibility of complete representation. I follow the advice of researcher and self-proclaimed 'story catcher' Brené Brown, who notes, "if you want to honour the stories that people have shared with you, you have to stay rigorous in your attempts to accurately capture their meaning" (130).



## 3.2 Data Analysis

The method that I used to analyze the interview transcripts was narrative inquiry. I now turn to a discussion of narrative inquiry as a tool that can expand understandings of safe space.

### 3.2.1 Narrative Inquiry

The method of narrative inquiry for analyzing the interview data insists that I read the world from the inside out; that is, I open up the many meanings of safe space by focusing on depth and detail in each narrative, rather than breadth, to center the youths' perspectives (Chase 667). In fact, I was drawn to this method precisely because it encourages the interview partners to narrate stories about their worlds with the aim of resisting and transforming accounts of who they are that have been imposed upon them (Fonow and Cook 2217-8). With this in mind, my research design invests in narrative inquiry as a meaning-making tool that can foster a plurality of assertions and representations and provide hope for learning and understanding across differences (Shuman 5; Stone-Mediatore 116).

In the book chapter "Narrative Inquiry: Multiple Lenses, Approaches, Voices," Susan Chase traces the many descriptions of, and approaches to, narrative inquiry in qualitative research with interviews. Narrative inquiry takes an interest in, Chase suggests, "biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them" (651). According to Chase, a narrative in the most basic sense can be (1) a short, event-based story; (2) an extended story about a significant aspect of one's life, including schooling; or (3) a narrative of one's entire life (652). Most relevant for this research is a tension that Chase addresses concerning the interpretive process: how to locate the interview partner as narrator, both during the interview, and afterwards, during analysis (661). When it comes to interview-based research, Chase suggests the 'narrator-listener' relationship can be extended past the interview and into analysis if the researcher shifts their

focus to the specificities—subject positions, ambiguities, and complexities—*within* each narrator’s story instead of relying on the traditional method of locating general themes *across* interviews (663). During my analysis of the interview transcripts, I followed the recommendation of Chase, and so I ‘moved’ and interpreted the data in a way that prioritized, and responded to, the particulars and nuances within each youths’ narrative (663).

I also found Caitlin Cahill’s collective praxis approach helpful when locating the interview partners as narrators. A collective praxis approach, Cahill highlights, is about embedding the youth in the research by centering a youth perspective, rather than having the research be ‘on’ or ‘about’ them, in which “they just assist in the collection of data” (297-8). As such, I framed the interview as an interactional context for the telling of narrative, thus involving the youth as authorities on their own experiences, and as having agency to answer, alter, and/or reject interview questions (Cahill 299); as mentioned, the youth were active in deciding which questions were meaningful to them and in brainstorming other avenues for inquiry. I carried over the collective praxis approach into the interpretive process, with data analysis that, ideally, elevates and complements the voices of the youth that I interviewed. In view of that, the content of the findings chapter is organized so that each youth’s narrative is discussed in its own section to emphasize my accountability to the narrator.

In the book chapter “Subversive Stories and the Critique of Empathy,” Amy Shuman describes storytelling as a vehicle for accumulating, sorting, and making meaning out of raw experiences (1, 9). There are layers to stories, as Shuman notes, when you consider the social location of the narrator, the larger social horizon in which the story is expressed, and how the story gets interpreted (2). What happens is a complex bringing together of intersections and absences—among history, memory, trauma, and change—what Shuman calls, “fragments linked

by fragile traces” (3). This aligns with Sandra Stahl’s description of narrative as the combining of fragments of ‘truth’ with the strategic enhancing of reality to create a sort of patchwork story through a process Stahl labels, ‘artistic manipulation’ (19). *Can stories be a source of truth and knowledge? Is the experience of an event truly knowable, accessible, and translatable to others?* Arthur Frank suggests that narratives may never resolve these kinds of questions, for their work is to “remind us that we have to live with complicated truths” (5). To put it another way, having partial, invested, and/or contested knowledge is still knowing for knowledge is always-already partial and situated (Kumashiro “‘Posts’ Perspectives” 7; Richardson 961). Given that people differ in their constructions of reality, Kevin Kumashiro notes, “the knowledge we gain from any text will always be partial [...] Such partiality means that, inevitably, the text will reflect the realities of some people but miss those of others; it will represent the voices of some groups but silence those of others; and in doing so, it will challenge some stereotypes while reinforcing others” (“‘Posts’ Perspectives” 7). What I take this to mean is that storytelling is not about producing absolute truths but many meanings, and that knowledge, though often partial, can be held in stories. This research explores what I consider *multiple truths and knowledges* around safe space in schools.

Overall, narrative inquiry is the most relevant and useful method for answering the questions of this thesis because, as Heinz Klein and Michael Myers suggest, it seeks to “understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them” (69). The interview partners are narrators with valuable insights and stories to tell which can expand understandings of safe space and perhaps, provide a deeper level of understanding of their recent school-based lives. Moreover, the method of narrative inquiry can, as Chase suggests, “provide a window to the contradictory and shifting nature of hegemonic discourses, which we tend to take for granted

as stable monolithic forces” (659). Indeed, the youths’ narratives in this study offer a window from which to *risk the obvious* and think through the restlessness of the phenomenon of safe space. Using narrative inquiry, I explore safe space in a way that opens up its many meanings—as contradictory and fragile, but also full of possibility. The youths’ narratives, both told and heard, have the potential to intervene in dominant understandings of safe space and gender in education (Fields et. al. 83; Frohard-Dourlent 73).

### 3.3 Researcher Stance

To better understand my method/ological choices, I include in this chapter a discussion of the stance that I bring to bear on this research, which consists of a commitment to collaboration in research, the respecting of differences, and acknowledging that gender and sexuality influence and shape our experiences in the world. The following outlines my researcher stance as one that is alliance-based and advocates for critical reflexivity in research.

#### 3.3.1 Alliance-based Research

Much of my approach to this research has been influenced by the writings of trans woman writer, performer, speaker, and activist Serano who highlights the importance of alliance-based research, which blends collaboration together with the acknowledging of differences; Serano asks us to admit that we are all individuals and that none of us have ‘superior knowledge’ when it comes to gender (358). What I take this to mean is that we should be wary of listening to stories and shaping them into something that will simply confirm our own beliefs while we filter out the rest (Carr 83; Clare 6).

I recognize that, within trans- communities, there are layers of identities and competing meanings that I will never be able to understand. I do not claim to know everything about trans-

people, nor do I want to claim the rights over the telling of trans- peoples' lives; more accurately, my research posture is a collaborative one that considers the trans- and non-binary youth to be experts on their own experiences and lives—as holding knowledges about their own needs in the world (Cahill 298; Clare 7). With this mind, I *invited* interview partners into a conversation about whether exploring safe space is an important and timely issue because I realize that the concerns of researchers (who are not trans-identified) are not always synonymous with the pressing concerns of trans- individuals. This is part of framing the research in a humble way—by recognizing that I will not be able to understand it all (e.g. conversations trans- people are having within their own lives and communities) while respecting differences at the same time. My research methodology therefore follows a collaborative, alliance-based approach, where those involved in the research process recognize their responsibility to one another.

### 3.3.2 Critical Reflexivity

I open my discussion on critical reflexivity in research with a quote from Gilbert, who suggests, “our educational biographies haunt our intellectual acts, and so a study of learning is always implicitly autobiographical” (xv); that is to say my position as researcher is not an assumed neutral one. Simply being a passive, detached, and objective observer is not entirely possible, or ideal. In other words, I can expect to be affected. A critical reflexive stance is my effort to frame the research in an open, honest, and transparent way, with a turn inward, to better understand myself and the decisions I make in the research process.

Sandra Kirby, Lorraine Greaves, and Colleen Reid describe critical reflexivity as “the capacity to locate one’s research activity in the same social world as the phenomena being studied” (39). I also take my cue from Jacob Hale who urges cis-gender researchers to “interrogate [their] own subject position” when working alongside trans- people (“Suggested

Rules”). As such, engaging in critical reflexivity asks that I recognize my own social location from which I move about the world as a young person, as white, as woman-identified, as differently abled—and who accesses privilege (and faces oppression) from this social location every day (“Dr Heather Hackman”; Kirby et. al. 39). It is essential that I acknowledge my life experiences, and my own encounters with, and understandings of, safe space and gender in education. I continue this section with a personal anecdote from the journey that led me to ‘do’ this particular research.

As a recently trained educator, I feel a sense of discomfort and urgency around this topic because there were very few moments in my teacher training dedicated to the specificities of teaching and learning among trans- youth. The results of *The Every Teacher Project*,<sup>35</sup> echoes this sentiment; where current Canadian educators were asked whether they felt their Bachelor of Education program prepared them to address issues pertaining to gender and sexual diversity in schools, 59% reported that it did not (Taylor et. al. “Every Teacher” 136). Educators also reported that few courses, if any, included content addressing the issues that LGBTQ+ students experience in schools and, most notably, the topic least likely to be incorporated: transgender identity (Taylor et. al. “Every Teacher” 137-9). Along the same lines, Gilbert writes about meeting pre-service teachers who reported not having discussed LGBTQ+ issues in their entire teacher education (97); Gilbert remarks, “this silence speaks loudly to the university’s, the schools’, and their own failure to see LGBTQ lives as worthy of notice” (97). In my experience, class discussions focused on ostensibly pragmatic questions. *What are the differences between boys and girls in the classroom?* It is questions like this from which all other questions around gender in education tend to arise. This is unfortunate, though, because seemingly harmless

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<sup>35</sup> *The Every Teacher Project* (2015) investigated the perspectives of Canadian educators on the safety and inclusion of LGBTQ students and topics in schools (Taylor et. al. “Every Teacher” viii).

questions maintain and reinforce the mutually exclusive male-female gender binary in schools. What are missing are the unpredictable questions and difficult conversations that go unsaid and thus continue “the tangled web of ignorance that currently exists” (Sumara and Davis 200).

Admittedly, I expected the teacher education program that I attended to be more critical of the ways that trans-identified and non-binary students are left out of school spaces and face barriers to education for existing in their own bodies. I agree with Gilbert, the absence of discussion has meaning (97); I take up such absences and gaps by talking about gender and schooling, and by prioritizing the perspectives of trans-identified and non-binary youth. This research emerges from a profound discomfort—a discomfort from which I am motivated to insist that things can be done differently. The youths’ insights around safe space are the focus of the two next chapters; first, I explore the research findings and after that, I discuss some suggestions for moving forward.

### 3.4 Chapter Summary

Within the space of this chapter, I outlined my method/ological approach and research design choices. I explained my procedures for gathering the research data by describing the selection and recruitment of interview partners, the particular type of interviews that I conducted, including an outline of the topics and questions that guided the interviews, and lastly, my transcription techniques. Then, I thought through narrative inquiry as a tool in meaning-making and after that, bared my researcher stance; this is where I highlighted the social location that brings me to ‘do’ this particular research. In the next chapter, I explain the research findings; this is where I have used narrative inquiry to ‘move’ and analyze the data. Here, I explore encounters with, and interpretations of, safe space from the youths’ narratives.

## Chapter 4: Findings

Within the space of this chapter, I flesh out the research findings; this is where I use the method of narrative inquiry to ‘move’ and analyze the interview data. In particular, I explore Evy, Quinn, and Sebastian’s meanings around, and experiences of, safe space from high school. Some of the school spaces that get talked about include, but are not limited to: hallways, washrooms, change rooms, and the art classroom. I approach analysis of the youths’ narratives in a similar way to Short, who conducted interviews with queer high school students; he writes, “rather than turning to so-called grand theories to explain the lives of students ‘on the ground,’ I have positioned the students as authorities about themselves” (“Don’t Be So Gay!” 216). As I unfold the research findings here, I do work closely with theory but also, importantly, position the interview partners as active meaning makers that speak for themselves, by offering their descriptions (and, in certain instances, their interpretations) of their experiences.

In writing this chapter, I also worked through a (productive) tension regarding how to best organize the content. Because a main tenet of my methodological stance is to elevate and complement the voices of the youth, I present long passages from their narratives, with analysis of the findings coming directly after, so that the flow of the stories are not interrupted or overshadowed. In this way, my voice as the researcher “speaks differently from, but not disrespectfully of, the narrator’s voice” (Chase 664). Moreover, I do not describe their identities in much detail here, but let words speak for them. Above all, the research findings do not aim to produce a single meaning of safe space; instead, I focus on depth and detail in each narrative, where safe space is explicitly invoked, to avoid composing a sort of “‘recipe’ for a safe space” (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1347). I take this chapter to document the subtleties and nuances in the youths’ narratives to open up the many meanings of safe space.



## 4.1 Evy

Evy attended a public secondary school located in a suburban area in Ontario and graduated in 2009. Evy uses female pronouns (she and her) and self-identifies as a trans woman, which is different from the way she identified her gender in high school:

In high school I thought I was cis-gendered, and I was pretty sure I was straight. I was the *token* straight ally in our gay-straight alliance at the high school, which, in retrospect [laughter].

In talking with Evy, and after carefully reading through our transcribed interview, a thread of ideas emerged which offer insight into how she understands safe space. While reflecting on her spatial experiences from high school, Evy conceptualizes safe space as comfortable and discrete.

### 4.1.1 “It’s somewhere where people are comfortable”

Matters of comfort are continuously highlighted in Evy’s narrative: “I keep on coming back to the word comfort, you know, it’s like a place where people can be themselves.” When I asked Evy how she understands safe space, she aligned safe space with comfort:

Um, I think a lot of it would have to do with comfort. You know, it’s... if you’re comfortable in a place then you’re going to feel safe there, like... But I guess, you know, just because you’re comfortable in a place doesn’t mean you’re necessarily safe there, but if you’re not comfortable in a place then it’s never going to feel like a safe space *to you*. So, it has to be a place where you *can* feel comfortable, and then all the efforts are made to make sure that that comfort is, like, you can trust that comfort, that you actually are safe from anyone coming in and doing anything, or judging you or anything. So it’s somewhere where people are comfortable.

In Evy’s assessment, there is a kind of slipperiness to safe space; she conveys that comfort does not automatically and necessarily equal safety, and yet comfort is foundational to safe space. Her stance therefore contrasts those of education scholars, many of whom advocate for discomfort as educationally productive—discomfort is considered the birthplace of intellectual growth because it encourages critical dialogue and the sharpening of our perspectives on the world through

exposure to different ways of knowing (Boler 177; Boostrum 407; Hunter 16). These scholars tend to conceptualize comfort, on the other hand, as meaning predictability and censorship; though, for Evy, a comfortable place is exactly where, she says, “people can be themselves.” From there, Evy described that effort is needed to foster comfort in safe space—“then all the efforts are made to make sure that that comfort is, like, you can trust that comfort...” In this sense, safe space is a sincere attempt, a *doing* to ensure the felt comfort of those inhabiting such a space. Evy made an association between safe space and comfort, but also with trust in that comfort to provide safety, in her words, “from anyone coming in and doing anything, or judging you.” The trust in comfort to provide safety *from* others, *from* (potential) harm—like harmful acts or judgement—can be traced back to the idea of ‘protection’ that I mentioned previously in regards to second wave feminist activism and normative definitions of safe space in pedagogical communities (Holley and Steiner 50; Hunter 8-9; Rosenfeld and Noterman 1354). It is clear that Evy is alluding to protection; in fact, her idea of protection is similar to the ones found in activist contexts, which suggests that safe space continues to offer an important source of support for those interested in keeping out danger and (potential) harm (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1346). Her view also signals the flexibility of safe space to serve different populations in particular contexts over time—in Evy’s case, comfort is central to safety (and protection) in school spaces.

When I asked Evy about finding comfort in schooling, she reflected on her past experience in two specific school spaces, the classroom and the gym change room. I notice how spatial dynamics can affect interactions (and refusal of interactions) with educators:

A lot of the teachers had, like, somewhere in their classroom like the stickers, you know, with the triangle and, you know, we’re allies or whatever, or this is an LGBTQ safe space and everything, but... it was... like a silent thing, you know, it was like the stickers are up there and you see it and you can appreciate it, but it’s not like it felt any different. It wasn’t like by the addition of that sticker it magically became, “alright, I’m comfortable being who I am here,” it’s, “alright, maybe this

teacher is someone who I can talk to later on. With gym class and stuff like, it was, you know, very hyper-masculine type of thing, you know, it was, you go into a room with a bunch of boys, you change as fast as you can because no one wants to seem at all like, “*Oh*, I’m not interested in guys at all. I don’t want to look at anything,” it’s like [laughter]. It’s almost ridiculous how... afraid everyone was to appear anything outside the norm. So like, the teacher might still have been incredibly— might have been a great person to talk to, but you’d never know because you were entering it through that portal of the gym change room.

In this passage, Evy gestures toward the idea that social dynamics are embedded in school spaces (Massey “Concepts” 16-7). For instance, Evy observes that a sticker promoting ‘LGBTQ safe space’ in a classroom does not magically alter the space, but instead signals the stance of the classroom teacher as someone who might act as a listening ear or resource for LGBTQ students. Alternatively, Frohard-Dourlent suggests that safe space stickers, which may signal open-mindedness can, in fact, “minimise the ways in which someone may inadvertently create moments of unsafety or participate in oppressive institutional practices. It does not give educators any discursive tools to discuss unintentional complicity in institutional practices that contribute to the maintenance of heteronormativity and gender conformity in schools” (69). In Evy’s perspective, safe space stickers—that are up there, visible, and yet silent—may function symbolically more than anything; they did not change her experience of the space or allow her to comfortably express her identity, as she mentioned. I wonder if the presence of a safe space sticker can be read as an example of a ‘safety object’ intended for *working towards* safe space; then again, following Frohard-Dourlent, the presence of a safe space sticker may unintentionally direct school professionals away from having those difficult conversations about how everyday school spaces are entwined with the male-female gender binary.

Evy recalled that her experience with the gendered organization of gym class—which foreclosed any affirmation of her felt gender at the time—held consequences for how she could take up space and interact with the gym teacher. Evy’s encounter with the gym change room as a

‘hyper-masculine’ space reminds me of Sara Ahmed’s discussion of pre-gendered spaces (148); that is, the male change room had already taken on the shape of ‘hyper-masculinity’ and so “to appear anything outside the norm,” as Evy put it, meant not fitting in to that space—I circle back to this idea in what follows. Evy’s experience confirms that schools are sites where youth learn not only in a pedagogical sense, but also where they learn to reproduce social norms so as to not threaten the dominant social order (Savage and Schanding 2).

When I asked Evy to address the specific question of what a safe space needs to look like to be comfortable for a trans- youth, she said:

Um... [sigh] well part of it would be that the other people who are there, like, if its people who they already know from outside and they, who they know– not only that they know from outside, but they know are *comfortable* with gender identity issues and aren’t going to suddenly freak out, and aren’t going to spread it or aren’t going to do anything. Um, a place where maybe they see other trans youth that are already there and being able to express their identity. Like, not thinking “Oh no, I’m going to be the only one there who looks different.”

For Evy, the ability to freely express your gender identity—and knowing that others are okay doing the same—is essential to matters of comfort. What Evy underscores is the importance of thinking about safe space in terms of *relationality* (Massey “For Space” 10-1); that is, safe space can foster positive interactions—networks, exchanges, and connections—among individuals around the topic of gender (Massey “Concepts” 16-7). Evy also talked with me about safe space as being created over time:

I think, realistically, it needs to become a safe space over time, like... It’s the type of thing where if you haven’t been to a space yet, you don’t really know what the social norms are there. It can be a perfectly good safe space for you, but until you’re comfortable there it’s not going to seem like a safe space. And, I guess ideally one of the things that a safe space would do is help make sure you can be acclimatized and become comfortable as fast as possible.

Evy speaks to the experience of ‘looking different’ and perhaps, being out of place, and conveys an awareness of the discomfort felt by bodies that move through space with already established

social norms (Rooke 661; Stone 230-1). In a consideration of the relationship between the intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places, Ahmed describes how heteronormativity functions as a space of comfort for those who can inhabit it with ease—certain bodies are allowed to extend into the surfaces of social spaces that have already taken on their shape (148). For Ahmed, comfort is located in the relationship between the body and the space that surrounds it:

To be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting, the surfaces of bodies disappear from view. The disappearance of the surface is instructive: in feelings of comfort, bodies extend into spaces, and spaces extend into bodies. (148)

Ahmed suggests that comfort happens when there is a kind of 'perfect fit' between the unambiguously gendered body and the space that it occupies (147-8); discomfort, on the other hand, is characterized by a feeling of disorientation, feeling "out of place, awkward or unsettled" (Ahmed 148). A comfortable body relaxes, but a queer subject can feel uncomfortable when their body tries to 'fit in' certain spaces that have already taken on a straight and neatly gendered shape (Ahmed 148). What Evy articulates is the importance of feeling a sense of alignment, acceptance, and belonging in space; therefore, efforts to make space comfortable, according to Evy, is intrinsic to safety in schools.

#### 4.1.2 "This over here is a safe place"

For Evy, safe space also means discreteness. When I talked with Evy, she explained to me that she understands safe space as secluded and private:

I mean it has to be inclusive, positive, it has to be friendly, it has to be welcoming, it has to be secluded, private, you know. It's not a safe space if it's, you know, the open floor of an atrium. It's a safe place when it's a closed off area.

While Evy does identify other attachments to safe space—inclusive, positive, friendly, and welcoming—the idea that safe space is a separate, distinct area from other spaces of schooling was a common thread throughout her narrative. She described for me her view in some detail:

Um... I think it has to be, you know, *defined* from other places; like it has to be, you know, this over here is a safe place, [quickly] and then this other place somewhere else, this is not a safe place. Like, you might be able to talk about your gender identity here, it might be a place where you're meant to be talking about your gender identity – that's the purpose of the place – but it's not a safe place, just by its nature right, so... It's good to have them, but it shouldn't be everything should strive to be a safe place, per se, because eventually we have to go out in the real world where not everything is, and you have to be ready for that as well.

Evy suggests that just because a space is labelled or created to be 'safe' ("that's the purpose of the place"), that does not mean it actually is; as Evy mentions, a place is not safe "just by its nature." This reminds me of Massey's theorizing of space as *becoming* and created and being constantly recreated ("Concepts" 17). Evy understands safe space as being created purposefully and with planning—it has firm intentions to be private, welcoming, etc. What is more, Evy gestures toward the shifting nature of space by suggesting that an already established space can be recreated; in her view, a classroom, rather than the open floor of an atrium, can be converted into a safe space because it is its own room and thus defined from other places.

With reference to the 'real world' Evy illustrates the sense that educational spaces are a critical source of both risk and protection. When I asked Evy to further explain her distinction between safe space and 'real world' spaces, she used the example of school hallways to elaborate on her perspective:

Hallways definitely aren't safe spaces, they're very much, you know, real-world, you know, jungle-type situations [laughter]. 'Cause it's like, in the real world we can't control and make sure everyone is going to behave in appropriate ways. It's—obviously that would be great if everyone did, but it's the type of thing where you can't effect change on that large scale so, it's a large part of, you know, being Jewish, being queer, being any minority is learning how to deal with that unfortunately and, you know, learning how to fight back about that, and like a large

part of it is, you know, just trying to change it. But learning how to live in the world until we manage to change it, so... high school hallways, it's, yes, it would be great if no one made a fuss if a girl kissed her girlfriend in the hallway but that wasn't the reality, it was— the reality would be that people would be like laughing at it, pointing at it, and probably making inappropriate gestures and everything.

What Evy underlines is that discrete, separated safe space—that might also be positive and friendly—still does not necessarily prepare ‘minority’ students for, as Evy describes, “the real world we can’t control.” Evy alludes to the unpredictability of spaces with her discussion of school hallways. In this way, Evy’s view echoes Bostrum’s critical stance on safe space, which is uncertain about notions of safety that rely on predictability because they tend to shield individuals from the messy realities of the world; Bostrum writes, “we have to be brave because along the way we are going to be ‘vulnerable and exposed’; we are going to encounter images that are ‘alienating and shocking.’ We are going to be very unsafe” (407). Likewise, Evy speaks to the bravery required of us in the ‘real world’: “It’s good to have them, but it shouldn’t be everything should strive to be a safe place, per se, because eventually we have to go out in the real world where not everything is, and you have to be ready for that as well.” This readiness to, in her words, “fight back” about inappropriate gestures that happen in spaces outside the *defined* safe space conveys to me Evy’s expectation of safe space—safe space could be a protective factor against situations in the world where not everything is safe.

Evy’s sentiment about “learning how to live in the world until we manage to change it” reflects the weight of learning how to strategically navigate certain spaces, particularly high school hallways. Evy’s example starkly demonstrates the oppressive reality for many trans-students who are brushing up against a hostile climate in their schools (Dyck 6-8; Taylor et. al. “Every Class” 23). As Schmidt notes, “the division of school into safe and unsafe spaces limits student travel [...] These discrepancies in positions and ease of movement mean there is no

universal school experience” (267). From her own school-based experience, Evy highlights the tension of moving in and through school spaces as a ‘minority’—as Jewish and queer—and, as she put it: “learning how to deal with that unfortunately and, you know, learning how to fight back about that, and like a large part of it is, you know, just trying to change it.”

When I asked Evy to address the specific questions of what change means to her and what her ideal safe space in high school might look like, she responded with the following:

Ideal so you know it doesn't have to really be realistic [laughter]. You know it's, uh, it's— its own room. It's not like a converted classroom or any— Well, it can be a converted classroom, but it's not like it's just used to be a classroom. It's a space where you're going to know the people who are in it, so, you almost have to be like cleared to get into that room, and you can just go to that room whenever you need to, and the room is, you know, it has comfortable chairs and couches, it has someone there to talk to, its— And the hardest thing is it isn't a place that you're judged for being seen going to. It isn't a place where people say, “*Oh... you're going into that room, over there,*” its like, “Oh, yeah, they're just going into another room.” And inside the room is a place where you can be safe.

For Evy, the gay-straight alliance (GSA) meeting was the closest thing she experienced to a safe space in her high school, even though, as she mentioned to me, the teacher who facilitated the group had changed a couple of times. She described the GSA as “a small tight-knit community that would always stand up for each other.” Evy made an observation about the GSA as working towards safeness:

The GSA was a *proto* safe space, if that makes sense, like it was like, it had some of the ideals of being a safe space, like, a place where you can be yourself, but it wasn't really a place free of like drama and judgement or anything, right like, it was a bunch of high school students... and [laughter] you know, its... It's like, “Oh, let's talk about what this person did behind their backs and everything” rather than, you know, yeah, someone might have done something but that's not something that you need to discuss at the GSA meeting, or ever really, you know, it's let that person feel welcome there; and that wasn't really a part of it yet, I don't think. It was like *almost* a safe space.

From Evy's experience, the GSA at her high school was ‘almost’ a safe space, presumably because it was a site of both welcome and exclusion—this underscores the double-edged quality



of safe space; as Evy notes, the GSA was “a place where you can be yourself, but it wasn’t really a place free of like drama and judgement or anything.” With the definitive use of ‘proto’ and ‘almost’ safe space, Evy also illustrates the sense that safe space is always under construction (Massey “Concepts” 17). Above all, Evy’s perspective suggests an alternative discourse to safe space, one that advocates for conceptualizing safe space in terms of comfort and discreteness.

## 4.2 Quinn

Quinn graduated in 2014 from a publically funded secondary school in Ontario. Quinn uses gender-neutral pronouns (they, their, them) and self-identifies their gender as non-binary,<sup>36</sup> more specifically they identify as an intersex individual. In talking with Quinn, I learned that they conceptualize safe space as an area where you can live and exist without feeling a sense of wrongness—their understanding of safe space is deeply rooted in their experience of place, the rural area where their high school was located. Quinn’s perspective also highlighted the notion that safe space, in their words, “should already be the baseline”; specifically, Quinn speaks to their understanding of safe space versus how safe space was being pursued at their particular high school. In what follows, I unfold their unique insights into the research inquiry.

### 4.2.1 “Somewhere where you can exist”

In looking back on their spatial experiences from high school, Quinn explained what safe space means to them:

I think it’s like... I think it’s really sad that we have to have somewhere that people can go where they don’t feel alienated, um, I– but safe space, to me, is just somewhere where you can exist without people telling you your existence is *wrong*.

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<sup>36</sup> For Quinn, identifying as non-binary means they do not self-identify their gender within the male-female binary as exclusively ‘male’ or ‘female.’ As Quinn put it, “I didn’t want to be *this* or *this*, both of them felt wrong to me.”

Safe space was identified by Quinn as somewhere where you are not made to feel wrong; this was a common thread in their narrative. After carefully tracing back through our transcribed interview, I found that Quinn’s perspective on safe space—as somewhere that you can exist without wrongness—was shaped largely by their attachment to place, the rural area in Ontario where they attended high school:

I could see the cornfields from the window, so it was– yeah, it was a rural high school [laughter].

Quinn went on to mention how the rural ethos—with its specific gender roles—had impacted the spaces of their schooling:

You marry the opposite, [pause and laughter] the opposite, you know what I mean, I don’t like that term, but you know what I mean. You marry someone like you’re a man you marry a woman, and then you have *eighty* children and you all grow up together on your farm [laughter]. Like very, um, [pause] gender roles. Um, girls were discouraged from taking, like, shop classes, um, and they had a female-only shop class for girls who took shop. It was a public school, although very conservative, and, um, a lot of the teachers were, um, like conservative Christian, uh, directly opposing the, like, the GSA and stuff like that... Verbally, directly opposing it, and all like, yeah, it was *yikes* [laughter].

Quinn articulated their association between the conservative undertones of the rural area where they lived and the spatial tensions of their school, which divided students along gender lines.<sup>37</sup>

David Gruenewald, whose research engages with pedagogy and place, suggests that, “contextual, geographical conditions [...] shape people” (4). What Gruenewald means is that who we are is affected by the place that we inhabit and each place has its own set of ideas and beliefs (4). In Quinn’s case, it appeared that the influence of normative social orders, particularly conservative Christianity, filtered through to find expression in the spaces of their schooling (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 203).

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<sup>37</sup> This is not to say that all rural places are conservative or that all school spaces in rural areas divide students by exclusively ‘male’ and ‘female’ genders. This discussion is meant to reflect Quinn’s particular experience.

Quinn recalled in some detail that encounters with the religious stance of some teachers were a great obstacle to bringing LGBT realities into schooling via safe space:

The safe space was just like, uh, one of the teacher's classrooms. And, uh, she was really nice. She was... she was *great*. But, uh, it's a lot of, um, problems with other teachers and uh, teachers would actually come in to the classroom and tell *us* their opinion on LGBT [laughter]. Um, we were doing a bake sale, um, to raise money so we could – I don't remember what the cause was but – um, and, uh a teacher came right up to us and told us that it shouldn't be allowed in the school. Like the GSA, safe space, that it shouldn't be talked about, that it's wrong. The teacher was very religious and believed that it was, um, against what God wants and that it shouldn't be allowed in school, and, [quietly] yeah...

Quinn conveyed to me the challenge of fostering safe space in their school with the threat of religious opposition; as they recalled, “teachers would actually come in to the classroom and tell *us* their opinion on LGBT.” In Quinn's view, the needs of LGBT students were at odds with the religious beliefs of teachers who directly opposed the safe space. Many of the interview participants in Short's study similarly observed the difficulties posed by religion; Short writes, “religious-based adult anxieties about queer lives and queer realities are linked with how homophobia [and heteronormativity] develops in high schools” (“Don't Be So Gay!” 202). By underlining the conservative context of their school, Quinn illustrated the impossibility of safe space where religious discourse aimed the notion of wrongness at LGBT students. Rather than denying or suppressing gender nonconforming identities as the religious stance of some teachers demanded, Quinn's perspective suggests that students should be free to emphasize their uniqueness and not be made to feel wrong.

When I asked Quinn to address the specific question of whether safe space mattered to them in high school, they expressed that being made to feel wrong had impacted their sense of self and connection to safe space:

I had a lot of self-worth issues in high school and uh, I– I think like, [sighing] it didn't, but that's because I, I didn't like myself and I didn't think that– Like I

thought I was *wrong* so I thought it was... like I felt like because I was wrong I didn't, like, deserve [quietly] a safe space.

As Sandy Stone notes, trans- bodies are those bodies that are often excluded because not fitting neatly into a socially prescribed gender category results in being thought of, and talked about, as a 'wrong body' (230-1). When I spoke with Quinn, they conveyed to me that being excluded and pushed out of space does not align with their imagining of safety in schools. Quinn's imagining of safe space holds closely the idea of acceptance and its other attachments—inclusion, respect, non-discrimination. For Quinn, safe space means being included and not feeling wrong.

During our conversation, what appeared important to Quinn was finding a space where they felt like they could exist:

I went to Pride in Toronto last year, that was fun [laughter]. I, uh, I'll talk about things, whereas before, like, I didn't so much. Um... I'm less afraid now than I was. Um, mostly, probably because, um, I'm *away* from that area that's uh, is not a nice area to be in.

Quinn described themselves as being "less afraid now" and a lot more open about their gender identity than they were in high school, presumably because their school was, in their words, "very conservative." Their response of moving away from the area where they attended high school can be attributed to the religious discourse that impacted their spatial experiences and understanding of safe space—with teachers entering the GSA safe space classroom and telling students that safe space "shouldn't be talked about, that it's wrong." Even though Quinn attended a public school, religion was a force that Quinn and other gender nonconforming students were confronting—it fuelled their sense of wrongness and foreclosed the possibility of the safe space that Quinn had imagined. The way in which Quinn talked about safe space highlights the notion that people and their stories are woven into the social landscape of the places they inhabit (Gruenewald 4).

#### 4.2.2 “Safe space should already be the baseline”

Quinn’s perspective also highlighted the notion that safe space, in their words, “should already be the baseline.” In particular, Quinn described for me their imagining of safe space as a kind of main supporting element or starting point—where safe space does not have to be intentional because people are already (compassionately) coexisting:

Safe space should already be the baseline, rather than something, where it’s something we’re intentionally having to put into place. I think that would be, like... That’s something I would really like to see. The way the world’s existing now I think it’s important because there needs to be a place where people can go where they don’t feel like they’re going to be, um, attacked – be it physically or verbally – for the way that they are, um. But I’d like to get to the point where it’s *not* a thing we need to do because people just aren’t jerks about it anymore [laughter].

In Quinn’s assessment, safe space, as it currently stands, is an intentional doing that is important in today’s world. At the same time, safe space, for Quinn, holds transformative potential; that is, Quinn holds close the idea of safe space as becoming a common foundation that can be built upon and from where the threat of attack, of any kind, is not even possible. Quinn went on to recall in some detail their specific spatial experience of the tech hallway, which they did not consider a safe space because of the threat it posed (of physical attack):

The hallways, like the tech hallway, which was like, the grade eleven hallway, it’s where all the grade eleven lockers were, it was *bad, it was bad, it was always bad*. It was where all the, um, like tech students would hang out, um, and, I don’t know why but a lot of the tech students seemed to be like the more– I went to elementary school with, uh– Like my elementary school was on a border so half of them went to one school and half of them went to the other and uh, a lot of the people I went to elementary school with seemed to hang out in that hallway and uh, I, I got beat up a lot in elementary school, so that was, that was not a safe place for me, at all.

Quinn’s experience of navigating a hostile space in their school illustrates that individuals are “working through space not merely existing in it” (Schmidt 269). In Quinn’s view, safe space in schools should be reconfigured as the already established place from which to focus on other

critical and timely matters that affect students' lived realities, such as the freedom to explore without fear. Quinn expanded on their view when I asked them to define safe space:

I'd say safe space is an area where people are free to be themselves and free to express themselves in the way that they choose without fear of judgement or, uh, retaliation for the choices that they make.

In Quinn's perspective, safe space is aligned with freedom; their perspective can be traced back to the origins of 'safe space' within the women's movement where safety once indicated a "certain license to speak and act freely" (Kenney 24). This is significant because it suggests that the thread of 'freedom' has been carried forward into the context of education—the discourse around safe space has travelled to become associated with the freedom to explore without judgement (Holley and Steiner 50; Ludlow 42). When I talked with Quinn, they pointed out to me the gap between their understanding of safe space—as involving freedom—and the way that safe space was being pursued at their particular high school. Quinn's association of safe space with freedom does not correspond with the actual location of their school's safe space; the classroom/detention room doubled as the safe space:

I don't really think there was a place in my high school that I could consider a safe space. Uh, like, we did have that GSA group where it was very like, um, inclusive, and it was very— But it still had that *undertone* of being like for, um, people who were like gay, lesbian, bisexual, um, etcetera. And like beyond that they didn't talk about, like, other, like, sexual identities even, let alone anything, uh, like transgender related or... It was very, uh, sexuality based and very like *general* sexuality based. Um, but, like it was just, it was just a classroom and it was in... It was actually the room that was usually used for detentions, because it was just a classroom, 'cause it wasn't a separate— We didn't have a detention room. It wasn't a big enough high school [laughter].

The irony here is that the intentional safe space was in the location where students were detained, possibly even for acts of harassment and violence toward those whom safe space was meant to 'protect.' Safe space, in Quinn's experience, appeared to be tied together with the very thing that it tried to detach from—confinement, discomfort, closure. Indeed, safe space was being pursued

at their particular school as a kind of afterthought, which does not align with Quinn's imagining of safe space as the baseline.

What Quinn's narrative also demonstrates is how certain students can benefit from safe space, while others cannot. As Quinn mentioned later in their interview, regarding the GSA: "when they said gay-straight alliance, they meant *gay* and *straight*." Quinn's assertion about "gay and straight" is emphasizing the dichotomous construction of sexuality; such binaries assume that people with other sexualities (besides gay and straight) simply do not exist. In this way, Quinn identified the double-edged nature of making schools safe, which can be both limiting and promising (Stengel and Weems 507); that is, internal boundaries can occur within such spaces, making them *for* some but not others (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1352). Quinn's perspective, therefore, also highlights the paradox of safe space as simultaneously inclusive and exclusive (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1346-7). The way that safe space was being pursued at their particular school indicated that safe space might be something that, in reality, might not look or work like it is imagined to.

When I asked Quinn to consider the tensions of making schools safe, they responded with an observation about power and privilege:

There are those people who are like, "Oh, you don't need a safe space" because they don't understand what it is, I don't think. Or they don't understand, uh, the things that the people who *want* safe spaces go through. Like, uh, if you've never faced discrimination based on your gender or your sex or your race or your religion or... You might not understand why someone would want a safe space.

What Quinn articulates is the relationship between power/privilege and how safe space is often configured as important only to certain 'other' marginalized individuals. In Quinn's assessment, those who have never faced discrimination based on their identity may not understand safe space or understand, in their words, "why someone would want a safe space." This observation

reminds me of a claim made by Stengel: “those who have the personal wherewithal to ask for safe space often don’t really need it. Those who are burdened with the weight of harassment aren’t able to ask for it even if they can imagine it” (526). Quinn’s stance also echoes Ludlow’s line of thought, which suggests that safety is, in fact, a privilege, precisely because, as Ludlow notes, “it is only from privileged perspectives that neutral or safe environments are viable” (45).

The ways that Quinn talked about safe space in relation to education conveyed to me its untidiness and imperfections, but also its potential; namely, they acknowledged that safe space is bound up with the power and privilege of those who occupy school spaces (Ludlow 45). At the same time, Quinn considers safe space as holding possibility to become something—a place with the freedom to explore gender identity where, as Quinn put it, “people just aren’t jerks about it anymore.” Above all, Quinn’s perspective proposes an alternative discourse to safe space, one that advocates for safe space as the baseline and as somewhere to exist without wrongness.

#### 4.3 Sebastian

Sebastian graduated in 2012 from a public secondary school located in an urban area in Ontario. Sebastian uses male pronouns (he and him) and self-identifies as a trans man, which is different from the way he identified his gender in high school; Sebastian recalled in some detail the experience of not being able to put a name to what he was feeling about his gender:

Because of course when you hit puberty, right, everything kind of goes a little funky and if you don’t follow the exact cookie cutter approach that you’re taught in health class, then all of a sudden “Oh god you’re weird.” So it’s— and it’s one of those things where it’s like, I don’t have like an *official diagnosis* for this, but my therapist and the doctor that I’m seeing now actually seem to think that I was intersex when I was born, as opposed to being like strictly female. Uh, so when I hit puberty I actually started going through male puberty as opposed to like female puberty; it took me a while for like breasts to develop, I actually got chest hair and a moustache before I got breasts, so [laughter] that was a good time. But nobody knew what was going on, so it was just kind of like, “Oh, the other girls just must be doing something different than I am, maybe they wax instead of shave. Maybe



they have better makeup than I do.” So I knew there was something going on, and I knew I wasn’t like them, but I didn’t know what that word was, or why it was that way. It was more of an exploration after I graduated, uh, for me to really like, “Oh hey, there’s a name to what I’m feeling.” So, [laughter] yeah, I definitely identify differently now than in high school.

In looking back at our transcribed interview conversation, I traced some of the ways that Sebastian talked about safe space in relation to education; in particular, Sebastian considers safe space as relational—involving peoples’ relationships and interactions—and he also identified the art classroom as a safe haven where he had space for himself. In what follows, I unpack these common threads from Sebastian’s narrative, which provide valuable insight into the phenomenon under study.

#### 4.3.1 “It’s the people that you choose to fill your space with”

When I asked Sebastian to describe for me how he understands safe space, he aligned safe space with relationality:

It’s the people that you choose to fill your space with. ‘Cause, yeah, like there’s nothing stopping somebody from opening up the door and, you know, yelling at you. But if you’ve got, you know, people in that space with you then any space can become a safe space; as long as, you know, you’ve got yourself or someone with you that, you know, isn’t afraid to, you know, take your hand, like hold your hand sometimes, isn’t afraid to like, you know, hold you back if you’re gonna to fight someone or, you know, maybe you need to fight someone, maybe that person deserves a good knock in the head for being a giant, you know, horrible person, so maybe they’ll hold your bag for you while you go hit on ‘em but you know. I definitely think it’s the relationships that you have with people and who you choose to fill up your space with. ‘Cause it’s not enough just to put a sticker on a classroom door and say, “Hey, this is a safe space” because, you know, what’s a sticker going to do to stop someone coming in and keeping at you, you know.

What Sebastian pointed out to me is that safe space, in his view, is affected by social dynamics, particularly the relationships and interactions among people within a particular space rather than the kind of set-up of the physical surface itself—as displaying a safe space sticker, for instance.

In this way, Sebastian’s perspective resonates with Massey’s theorizing of social space as the

host of “networks, links, exchanges, [and] connections” and as thus the ongoing product of relations-between (“Concepts” 16-8). Following Sebastian’s perspective, we might say that safe space is produced through our actions and encounters with one another; safe space is not fixed or already established as perfectly safe, precisely because spaces are the domain of relationships in practice (Massey “Concepts” 17). By underlining the slipperiness of what the safe space sticker means, Sebastian also articulates the unpredictability of spaces—stickers cannot stop, as Sebastian put it, “someone coming in and keeping at you.”

Sebastian talked with me further about safe space as the product of relations; he mentioned how the safeness of his (entire) school was largely attributable to the presence of LGBTQ-identified educators:

The entire school was kind of classified as “the gay school,” quote, quote, finger quotes for the recording [laughter]. The entire school was a gay-straight alliance [laughter]. Like when you walked into the school like you were entering like *one big safe zone*. It wasn’t just a classroom, the *entire school* was friendly to the LGBTQ community. It was one big safe space, because you’d get bullied at all the other high schools. Like we had, our Vice-Principal was, you know, she was a lesbian. We had like teachers and faculty that were, you know, of the community and I’m not sure if I had any transgender ones per se, but we definitely had like—the entire school was one big *safe zone*.

The occupation of school spaces by LGBTQ professionals meant the configuration of the entire school as “one big *safe zone*,” as Sebastian put it. Sebastian described for me that particular safe spaces within his school had existed, but the school, as a whole, was understood by him to be safe—bullying happened at “all the other high schools.” While Sebastian emphasized his school’s sweeping approach to safeness, he also noted a gap. In highlighting what Massey calls ‘power-geometries’ that shaped his spatial experiences of schooling, Sebastian conveyed to me a challenge that he was brushing up against—safe space separated out transgender people:

Like, my big problem was that I found that like transgender people – for as much as we’re included within the community – we’re still not looked at as like full blown– Like we don’t have the same kind of protection as like gays and lesbians. It’s the same kind of deal with like bisexual people, it’s like, they’re looked at in the community as being like, well, if you’re a bisexual girl and you’re not in a relationship with a girl, well then you’re not actually bisexual, you don’t have a right to be in this space because you’re in a relationship with a guy, therefore you’re not bisexual, you can’t come in our space. My experience with the community on whole is that they’re very, like, gatekeeper– like they have their gatekeepers and if you don’t conform to their... I suppose... expectations of what it is to be part of *their* community, they won’t let you in. That was my experience in high school. So while it was a safe place, if you didn’t like *fit in* to that space you were kind of like, “Alright, well, you’re sort of there, but you have to go over here, we don’t want you in this major space. You can have *this* one over here.” So we were a part of it but we were *a-part* from the majority.

In his experience, safe space was meant to ‘protect’ the entire school, but transgender people did not have, in Sebastian’s words, “the same kind of protection as like gays and lesbians.” As such, safe space unfolded in Sebastian’s narrative to be revealed as fragile; that is, safe space operated, in Sebastian’s view, in contradictory ways—to ‘protect’ some while monitoring others. By underlining safe space as relational, Sebastian acknowledges the layers of marginalization that transgender people face, such as exclusion within particular lesbian and gay communities, and within the heteronormative institution of schooling more broadly (Browne and Lim 615; Doan 639; Rooke 661). Indeed, matters of relationality impacted Sebastian’s experience of safe space where ‘gatekeepers’ held expectations, as Sebastian put it, around what safe space would look like and who is and is not allowed to fit in to that space. When I spoke with Sebastian about *fitting in* to spaces, particularly spaces bound up with social dynamics and identity politics, he explained to me the tension of being gendered in very specific and strategic ways:

Because of course everything revolves around society’s image of everything; society’s ideal image kind of dominates the world be it, you know, whether or not you’re a straight woman or you’re a gay man or you’re transgender or you’re bisexual, or... We all have these images that we as human beings are suppose to look at and say, “Yes, this is what it means to be *this*. This is what it means to be transgender, you need to be exactly like this.” Well, not everybody can live up to

that, not everyone can live up to these, and so anybody who doesn't fit into that exact cookie cutter you're having your identity erased, basically. And no one kind of helps you out because you don't, you don't *fit*. And, they will, they will completely annihilate your specific identity if you don't fit in with the identity that they seem to think that you should have. So I think that actually might be one of the major reasons why, like, trans wasn't quite a thing in high school because no one would fit into that category; so it was a lot of erased identities, a lot of, like, no acknowledgement of these things, and it's like, no that's— you're just this, your that, you need to fit in with our cliques.

Sebastian made the observation that school spaces, which are full of people with varying life stances, interests, and abilities, require careful navigating. In Sebastian's assessment, safe space can foster positive encounters of support—where someone is with you to hold your hand—but also negative encounters of conflict between people—yelling, fights, and a kind of refusal. With the definitive use of 'annihilate,' Sebastian also illustrated the sense that, in his words, the 'exact cookie cutter' image of "what it means to be transgender" completely eradicates and renders invisible transgender identity. As Butler reminds us, we are all products of particular spaces that are organized around narrow gender scripts ("Precarious Life" 145-6). Sebastian's narrative gestures toward the notion of safe space as relational and thus holding the possibility to be *reorganized*—this echoes Nash's claim that trans people can challenge and rework space ("Trans Experiences" 205); in particular, safe space is understood by Sebastian as an active container for layered and knotty social relations that are based on peoples' relationships and interactions (and identities) within such spaces.

#### 4.3.2 "The art room was my safe haven"

Sebastian also aligned safe space with the art classroom at his high school; this is where he had (made) space for himself. When I spoke with Sebastian about the school spaces that he considered safe, he described for me the role of the art classroom in fostering his sense of safety:

Well, I think the biggest one for me would be actually the art classroom. The teacher there, I had her all four years that I was there, she was my major's teacher, and she— Well her room was one of the ones that was used as kind of like — because it was the biggest one of course — it was an arts studio, so it had the most space outside of like the actual dance rooms. But that's where they would go and like have, like, their alliance meetings, when the meetings would take place at the school. So they had a little sticker on the door, and they had, you know, there was a couple of posters, but they were kind of by the teacher's desk. But it was probably the teacher herself that just really kind of drove it in, because we had like the quirkiest set of people in terms of like, I suppose, like, gender and sexuality. So we had uh, we had a lot of— they would always come in to the classroom and they'd you know, we'd talk with her if we ever had any issues. She was better than the student guidance counsellor was in terms of helping out with— helping students with just kind of like identity issues. She just made you feel comfortable and safe to be around. And of course then you start to associate like, you know, the sounds and the sights and the smells within a place that you feel safe, with this like, you know, safety. So, it got to the point where I was like smells of like paint and, you know, gross turpentine is just like, “Yeah, this is a safe place, Mrs. is here, and I've got, you know, the oil paints over that way, and it kind of smells like saw dust at the other room 'cause they were doing plastering.”

In Sebastian's experience, safe space was signalled by sensation; that is, the sounds, sights, and smells within the art classroom where Sebastian spent much of his time. In this perspective, safe space comes to be associated with consistency—a continual return to what you know and have always known to be safe. In Sebastian's assessment, it was the space of the art classroom where, in Sebastian's words, “the quirkiest set of people in terms of like, I suppose, like, gender and sexuality” could go and connect and talk. While the art classroom was used as the meeting spot for the gay-straight alliance, it was the stance of the art teacher who was “helping students with just kind of like identity issues” that solidified the space as comfortable and safe for Sebastian.

When Sebastian talked with me about his ‘grasping’ of safe space, he pointed out the multiple and elusive ways in which safe space seems to operate; that is, Sebastian identified safe space as individually specific—as tied to our personal selves:

I think I have a good grasp of it. I can't say for sure I understand it, you know, fully and truly, because everyone has a different understanding of different words 'cause, you know, safe could mean a totally different thing to another person. So it's one of

those things where it's all, you can have as great a concept as you want, but the moment you try and explain what safe means to you, to someone else, they look at you and go, "Wait, what are you talking about? How can the smell of turpentine make you feel safe? Like that's completely irrational." Well they could have something negative associated with the smell of turpentine, so... So in terms of what safe means to me personally, yes, I like to think I have a good grasp of the concept of what makes *me* feel safe in an environment.

In the above passage, Sebastian described for me the kind of partiality of safe space. While he has, in his words, "a good grasp of the concept of what makes *me* feel safe in an environment," still safe space may not be fully and truly knowable or easily translatable to others; as Sebastian explained, "you can have as great a concept as you want, but the moment you try and explain what safe means to you, to someone else, they look at you and go, 'Wait, what are you talking about?'" As such, Sebastian underlines the slipperiness of naming something as safe because, in his perspective, "safe could mean a totally different thing to another person." What Sebastian also illustrated is the sense that safe space, at any given time, can hold diverse and overlapping desires and bodies (and meanings) (Hubbard 642); this signals the complex and layered quality of safe space. As Massey reminds us, space can simultaneously carry the many perspectives and stories of different people ("For Space" 142). For Sebastian, safe space is idiosyncratic—each of us has a personal (and as he implies, perhaps peculiar) association with safe space.

When I asked Sebastian the specific question of whether or not safe space mattered to him in high school, he explained that safe spaces were, in his words, 'definitely good' as he was learning and exploring more about himself:

You get to learn about yourself and you get to explore, and that is what I was doing in high school, I was trying to figure everything out, I was, you know— "Why do I find this person attractive? What is it that I like about these people? Why do I feel this way? Why do I look this way?" So safe spaces were definitely, uh, was definitely good when I was going through those phases because I also had a great deal of depression before that; I was diagnosed with that quite early on. And, so sometimes the things that I would find or the things that I was exploring would really, you know, trigger that off, so like immediately go to where my safe space

was, while it was the entire the school, the art room was my safe haven. And it was there that I'd, you know, be able to talk it out. I'd be able to, you know, kind of deal with it slowly bit by bit with how it needed to be done. If I didn't have that I don't think I would've uh, I don't think I'd be as confident about myself as I would be, uh, if I hadn't had access to like that safe space because when every space is safe it becomes a little, like, I almost want to say underwhelming, it's like, everyone is just kind of like, yeah no, this is fine, everything is acceptable here, so like you get into that habit where like if you go to like, say like your general guidance counsellor, it's just like, oh, they'll give you like, you know, your explanation and stuff like that but you don't really get that kind of, I suppose, the help you really need. Because of course everybody's different right, some people need like to be sat down and like given a list like, this is how you fix all of your problems, other people, they need just like, you know, they need to cry it out, they need a hug, they need to be told that, you know, "Everything's going to be okay."

Sebastian aligned safe space with the art classroom because that was where he could find expression—he could “talk it out” and feel safe doing so; this appeared especially important to him because of his lived experience of depression. In looking back on his spatial experiences, Sebastian also identified the art classroom as an accessible space that fostered his sense of confidence. He articulated the critical role of this space as his personal ‘safe haven’ because, in his view, when *every* space is situated as safe it follows that peoples’ different needs can get overlooked; in other words, when safe spaces, including the kinds of supports available in those spaces, are general and meant to appeal to everyone (“everything is acceptable here”) then they can fail to validate the specific needs of each individual. Still, Sebastian’s perspective illustrates the notion that safe school spaces hold possibilities for trans- youth—the possibility to explore, to try, in his words, ‘to figure everything out’—in a culture that makes no space for them (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 83). For Sebastian, the art classroom mattered—with its familiar smell of turpentine and a teacher that supported students with identity issues. Above all, Sebastian’s narrative puts forth an alternative discourse to safe space, one that considers safe space as relational and as personal—a place to have (and make) space for yourself.

#### 4.4 Findings Summary

These narratives present major ideas that offer valuable insight into the research inquiry: to explore the phenomenon of safe space. The narratives capture the vast range of the youths' meanings around, and experiences of, safe space from high school; that is, the youth conceived of safe space along many lines—comfort, discreteness, fitting, freedom, acceptance, existing, not feeling wrong, relations, sensations. In fact, each youths' encounters in, and relationships to, school spaces were unique to their experience, which makes it difficult, and not necessarily ideal, to secure a single, definitive understanding of safe space; I have come to learn that there is no perfect mould or recipe (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1347). The narratives also confirm the changeability and unpredictability of spaces themselves, which renders the concept slippery and hard to pin down. Extrapolating from the data, then, we might come to realize the imperfection of safe space in that it may never be fully realized and it is certainly not universalizable (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1354-5). We might also consider safe space as something that never truly 'gets created'—in a closed and complete way—but as something that is continually 'being created' on an ongoing, shifting basis.

Taken together, the narratives reveal that spaces of schooling are related to material effects that made a difference to the youths' lived realities—what they could and could not do in school spaces, whether or not they could be safe in spaces, which tactics they employed in particular spaces. To illustrate, Quinn talked about their experience of having to strategically navigate their high school to find a washroom that they were comfortable using: "I'd always use the washrooms that no one used, the ones in the math department." Sebastian, for example, mentioned that he stopped going to gym class because he did not feel comfortable changing; he said: "I never felt comfortable changing in the girls change room. I would— I actually used to be



really really bad about skipping gym class [laughter], or ‘Oops! I forgot my gym clothes, I can’t participate today, I’ll take the zero on it.’”

The youth talked about safe space by offering their diverse perspectives and, in doing so, untangled the concept from its bondage to education policy. The way that safe space is rooted in a kind of ‘protectionist’ education rhetoric does not neatly align with the perspectives of the youth in this research, whose meanings around, and experiences of, safe space cross over many boundaries with various attachments. What the findings reveal is that Canada’s education system might be better served by conceptualizing safe space more broadly and in a way that takes into account the larger social context that situates heteronormativity and gender conformity as “‘the way things are’” (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 116). Broadening conceptions of safe space means a consideration not only of security and control of the school environment, but also of the complex ways in which trans- youth experience schooling (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 31); it requires a consideration of gender and education that engages with “the messy, ambivalent, and deeply contradictory spaces and relations of the school” (Gilbert xiii).

Bearing in mind my conversations with the youth, I acknowledge that, given our individual attachments to safe space, absolute safety for all may be unrealistic; as Serano writes: “in reality, there is no such thing as a ‘safe space.’ After all, the very notion of safety is predicated on a presumed and exclusionary sense of ‘sameness’ and ‘oneness’” (358). As such, I follow Holley and Steiner’s outlook: “possibly the best that instructors and students can strive for is the creation of *safer* space. The process of the creation of safer space could begin with classroom conversations about what it means for students and instructors to feel safe” (61; emphasis in original). I offer this thesis as an example of, and starting point for, conversations with young people about safe space.

#### 4.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I discussed the research findings; here, I explored the youths' encounters with, and interpretations of, safe space. The content of the next chapter, chapter 5, is a list of suggestions for moving forward, that emerged from the youths' narratives, on the subject of how schools can do better to support trans-identified and non-binary students.

## Chapter 5: Moving Forward

This chapter is concerned with moving forward in the direction of a more compassionate and socially just pedagogy. In particular, I provide insight into how schools can do better to support trans- youth by returning to the data and tracing suggestions that emerged from the youths' narratives. I present the content of this chapter as a list of suggestions for how schools, specifically teachers, might foster an educational stance that is more attuned and responsive to what matters to trans- youth. I take my cue from Paul Carr whose research, likewise, provides a framework (in the form of a list) for teacher education students to “[take] action aimed at ethical, relevant, social justice-based change” (82).

I echo Carr's method to highlight my own sense of urgency around, and interest in, engaging with the familiar and everydayness in education. As such, I approached the writing of this chapter with specific questions in mind—questions that deserve careful unpacking: *In what ways can schools expand and redraw compulsory gender boundaries? How might educators respond both administratively and 'on the ground' to provide supportive and gender affirming spaces? How can the lives of trans- youth be given greater value by the education system?* These questions arise, in part, out of the desire to fill in a gap from my teacher education experience; as mentioned, my teacher training neglected dialogue around the support needs of trans- youth in schools. This research takes up such gaps by drawing attention to how things can be done differently from the perspectives of trans-identified and non-binary youth. As Kelly reminds us, “as educators, we know well that, when given the space, opportunity, guidance and support, it is our students who will very often show us eloquently and convincingly what the issues are and what must be done” (“Module Seven”).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> There are several examples of student-led initiatives to effect change in education. The Beyond Bullying Project is one example; storytelling booths were set up in secondary schools across the U.S. to collect narratives that reflect

I begin the chapter by looking at the importance of accepting social locations of difference. Next, I turn to the hazards of the fixed position, and following the youths' advice, encourage educators to nurture their own self-reflection and ongoing education for professional development. Building on the last suggestion, I discuss the youths' call for educators to provide access to information and resources for transitioning students—I also address school knowledge via the curriculum that frames us. Then, I think through what it might mean to stumble over language; namely, this suggestion asks that we talk about gender in less narrow terms. Lastly, I outline one of the most relevant and significant needs identified by the youth: the need to make gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms available in school spaces.

While I am not able, nor do I intend, to capture the suggestions of *every* trans- youth (the list here is by no means exhaustive), still the suggestions are intended to form the starting place from which to learn more and explore further; as Carr notes, “critical learning and engagement involves an on-going process” and thus cannot be contained in a “quick 8-step approach” (82). By teasing out some of the most acute and salient needs identified by the youth, I aim to provide information that can enable educators to be more effective. I take this chapter to consider where to go from here as we imagine, and plan for, teaching and learning among trans- youth.

### 5.1 Accept that We All Have a Social Location

Well, acknowledging gender identities would be a good first step. Like, I— I’m sorry but you shouldn’t have teachers that are telling students that the way that they are is wrong, that’s not a teacher’s place. Um, and, just having trans students feel like they can exist and not be— not have that held against them – that they are the way that they are – because I feel like that happens a lot to trans students. (Quinn)

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the point of contact between the lives of LGBTQ+ youth and ordinary events—school assignments families, friendships, break-ups, bravery, and aspirations (“Beyond Bullying”). The project aimed to gather and share experiences and meanings “beyond victimization and bullying and to provoke new ways of understanding [...] outside of the official discourses of school curriculum, programs, and policies” (Fields et. al. 81-2).

There are as many different identities as there are people in the world; accepting this involves not merely *tolerating* difference, but truly understanding and honouring the fact that we all have a particular social location that informs our movements in and through the world. Quinn nudges educators in the direction of acceptance:

I feel like acceptance at it's like... highest form, it's just like— it doesn't matter at that point, what someone identifies as because it's just, it's just *who they are*, it's not a different thing, and it's not considered like weird or wrong, it's just *the way it is*, and it would be really awesome if we could reach that point.

There are so many layers that shape us as humans—layers that contradict, complicate, confuse, and brush up against one another. These layers are social markers commonly described in terms of ability, race, gender, sexuality, religion, family structure, heritage, socioeconomic status, and others. It is important to note, these social markers are not singular or monolithic categories, but rather intersect to make up our identities, which are never truly complete (Butler “Undoing Gender” 206-7; Kelly “Module Six Part 1”). In other words, our lives (and identities) are neither static nor linear—each of us grow and change so fluidly over the course of one lifetime.

Yet, just as there are many complex differences within and between people, there are also many different and overlapping forms of oppression—homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, cissexism, sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, ableism—that saturate the school day and remind me of the interrelationship among power, knowledge, and privilege (Kumashiro “‘Posts’ Perspectives” 3). Kumashiro refers to ‘oppression’ as “the repetition, throughout many levels of society, of harmful citational practices [...] that privilege certain identities and marginalize others” (“Troubling Education” 50-1). As mentioned, the male-female gender binary system is cited over and over in schooling and educators are implicated in this system in a multitude of ways—educators hold the power to allow and engage in specific practices and ways of knowing while disavowing others (Frohard-Dourlent 64). The institutional constraints that teachers are

working within must also be acknowledged; as H  l  ne Frohard-Dourlent notes, “educators can be agents of change and still complicit in these systems [of heteronormativity and gender conformity]” (73). As educators, we must therefore recognize schools as sites from which to unpack the “power and privilege that some enjoy at the expense of others” (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 230).

The youth in this study identified their particular needs that must be met in order for them to feel good about their identities while in school. Sebastian makes an observation about human uniqueness (that it is important to recognize) and connects it with the possibilities of safe space:

To be able to have a safe space within a school and then have, within that safe space, have the tools and resources for people to form like their *own* personalized safe space within. ‘Cause like I said before not everybody can deal with stuff the same way, we’re all unique human beings and everybody has different coping mechanisms and different abilities, uh, anxiety levels, stress levels, they have different breaking points. So what could be, you know, nothing to one person can be devastating to another and to be able to go into a place that is considered a place of safety and then, you know, further make yourself feel better using the tools and guidance and care that are provided within that space, that’d be awesome [laughter]. That is like ten out of ten great.

What Sebastian highlights is the impact of our particular, intersecting social locations on the construction of our daily reality (Hackford-Peer 549). When I spoke with Evy, she explained that an educational stance that is accepting of identities is one that practices non-judgement and does not separate students:

It’s being non-judgemental, but it’s also using their role as authority figures to introduce that non-judgementalness so, like, and make that a cultural thing throughout the high school, right, so you know, using your authority as a teacher to go, you know, “You *can’t* make fun of him for wearing a dress today, its fine for him to wear a dress. If he wants to wear a dress, he can wear a dress. If they want to use a different bathroom, that’s fine. And if they do anything inappropriate tell me. It’s the same if anyone did anything inappropriate you would tell me, its fine.” And, you know just, *being* – not just an understanding authority figure to the trans student – but enforcing a culture at the school where people are free to experiment with their gender identity and their gender expression. It isn’t separating people. It isn’t going, “Oh, this is a typical masculine activity or this is a typical feminine

activity,” any activity can be either masculine or feminine. It’s perfectly fine to be whatever you want, and then through that it’s, you know, “*Oh, I really enjoy painting my nails. Oh... this is neat.*”

Evy articulated the association between non-judgement and the unsettling of gender norms, both of which, in Evy’s assessment, are fundamental to accepting the social location of trans-students. A school culture where students are “free to experiment with their gender identity and their gender expression” was identified as important to Evy—schooling should not be about separating students according to ‘typical’ gendered activities. When I talked with Quinn about dividing students along gender lines, they described for me their experience in the female-only technology class and with school field trips:

I was put in the female-only tech class because it was like a grade nine tech rotation, um, and, I’m like, “Can I get transferred into one of the co-ed ones?” ‘cause they did have, like they had, um, co-ed ones, and then they had like the female-only, but then, like, I was like, “Can I get put in one of the co-ed ones?” and they were like “No.” I’m like *uh okay*. Um, and [long pause] there was stuff later, like we’d go on, um, field trips, and they’d be like “girls and boys” like gender-segregated activities and I’d kind of be like, “Why are we doing this?” It was stuff that has no relevance or like teachers would separate the class like, um, guys are gonna do this and girls are gonna do this, and I’d be like, like I’d approach this teacher afterwards, like, not during class, and I’d be like “Hey, like, I’m uncomfortable with this could we separate in another way?” I don’t care, like [sigh]. And that was denied.

The constant repetition of these kinds of gestures (i.e. dividing practices) is what solidifies gender norms and expectations in schooling (Butler “Gender Trouble” 24, 136; Frohard-Dourlent 64). As mentioned, ever-present in our social landscape is the defining and categorizing of that which is unpredictable, unknown, and perhaps, unknowable (Butler “Gender Trouble” 172-3); if the body is to remain legible it is forced to bear a recognizable (gendered) subject position (Butler “Gender Trouble” 172-3; Lorber 321-4). It is these exact processes that give rise to forms of oppression, which manifest for societal crisis management in the face of threats of difference, ‘otherness,’ and human complexity (“Judith Butler”; Stauffer “Interview”).

I imagine that our compassion for others can rise dramatically when we expect to see things differently, when we take it as a given that others will do things differently, and react differently to the same event. We need to move toward celebrating and affirming students' social locations as complexly layered in an effort to remain sensitive and responsive to their diverse and evolving identities (Martino and Kehler 120). As educators, we should therefore treat identities as multiple and intersected because "to speak of identities always and only in their separate(d) incarnations [...] denies the already-intersectedness of identities, but more importantly, masks the already-privileged status of certain identities (Kumashiro "Posts' Perspectives" 5).

After thinking through the youths' perspectives, I am left with my own, hopefully achievable, suggestion for educators, which is to *be open to difference*. What this involves is teaching and learning with a gentle curiosity around different ways of knowing and being, and persistently interjecting in moments of schooling where discrimination and injustice perpetuate the dominant social order. Above all, the suggestion posed here by the youth—to accept that we all have a social location—is about acknowledging that we all have our own unique set of experiences, knowledges, privileges, and histories in an effort to build bridges among people, particularly between teachers and trans-identified students.

## 5.2 See Self-Reflection (and Education) as Ongoing

Be educated about gender issues, that's the biggest thing, that's the number one thing. 'Cause it's all well and good to, you know, say that you're a safe space, but if you can't include all people, if you don't have like an ability to *help* the students that do need *help*. If you can't like really give them the advice or make them feel safe or if you don't know [sigh]... Like if you don't have that kind of knowledge, it's harder to make someone feel comfortable. (Sebastian)



To truly grasp a compassionate and socially just educational stance we need to consistently hold a mirror up our own social location and knowledge base. This suggestion brings me to a discussion of the hazards of the fixed position; that is, we must move beyond reinforcing what we already know to be ‘true’ simply because it is an easy place to live and work from (Kumashiro “‘Posts’ Perspectives” 7). At the same time, it is messy and often difficult to admit our own limitations. As Kumashiro notes, it is not surprising that “we are invested in reading [and teaching and learning] in particular ways in order to maintain our own sense of self” (“‘Posts’ Perspectives” 8). I think most educators—including myself—at some point in their professional careers have decided not to teach (or learn) about certain knowledges, identities, and political views outside of the mandated curriculum; however, classes are rarely (if ever) all straight and neatly gendered, so why only teach (and learn) about the dichotomous gender system and straightness (and whiteness, able-bodiedness, etc.) (Gilbert 102)? Kumashiro’s writings on anti-oppressive education highlight the partiality of our knowledges and how we must look beyond and underneath what is (and has always) been ‘known’ to foster a more compassionate and socially just educational stance (“‘Posts’ Perspectives” 4).

When I spoke with Evy about her support needs from high school, she addressed the lack of knowledge around transgender people:

We weren’t taught about transgender people. We weren’t taught really about LGTBQ issues at all, like, it was, yeah, it was through the rumour mill more than anything that we learned anything, so it was, we weren’t learning the things that we needed to know to discover ourselves really. And, if we had learned the things that we needed to know— Like, one of the big campaigns that we ran, with the GSA ran was, you know, was teaching that gay isn’t a slur, it’s like, we were at *that* point in high school so... [laughter].

What Evy identified is that educators always already have more learning to do because “there is always more to know” (Richardson 963). It is also imperative that educators not label themselves

an unquestionable ‘expert’ on trans- peoples’ lives, as Frohard-Dourlent explains, even if they have “considerable experience working with trans and gender-nonconforming students” (70). Put differently, “we should be wary of believing that we have all the knowledge” (Carr 83). This requires that educators, who interact most with students, have a willingness to learn and teach about relevant gender issues—this can help students better discover themselves, as Evy put it.

The commitment to continuous self-reflection is equally important. As educators, we should see that a self-reflexive turn inward—openly and honestly recognizing our assumptions, experiences, and social location—must be part of an on-going process that “happens year-round and not only in isolated and rare moments” (Kirby et. al. 39; Kumashiro “‘Posts’ Perspectives” 8). Self-reflection may be the starting point for deeply considering the implications of power and privilege in schooling (“Dr Heather Hackman”). Before having informed and critically engaged discussions about power and privilege with students, we should reflect upon the intersecting privileges (and oppressions) that we brush up against in our own daily lives—teachers must recognize that they are not neutral (Carr 84; “Dr Heather Hackman”). With that said, I want to invite a pedagogical model guided by self-reflection as a pathway to growth; the intention is to come to understand ourselves and our students in deeper and more meaningful ways. A compassionate and socially just educational stance should involve leaning in to moments of ‘unlearning’—essentially by “learning something different, learning something new, learning something that disrupts one’s commonsense view of the world” (Kumashiro “‘Posts’ Perspectives” 8). Self-reflection is especially important for beginning teachers who have the ability to enter already established school work spaces and shake up assumptions about, and the fixedness of, gender in education.

Quinn talked with me about (pre-service and in-service) training for teachers, which can increase their knowledge of, and ability to support, trans- students:

Um, also, um, teachers who have more training in gender and gender issues, and, um, then also can apply that in dealing with students who, um, [sigh] can like—micro-aggressions or, like, just aggressions towards, uh, trans students.

The Canadian education system, as Ryan Dyck indicates, has made some progress in addressing issues that are specific to sexuality, involving lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities, but the understanding of issues around gender identity and gender expression have been largely overlooked (8). Dyck’s report from the LGBTQ Youth Summit<sup>39</sup> on suicide prevention, recommends “pre-service teacher training on trans cultural competency for everyone who works within the education system” (8). The Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey, *Being Safe, Being Me*,<sup>40</sup> also makes the recommendation that teachers and other school professionals (e.g. school counselors and administrators) have training on “gender identity development and gender-affirming approaches” to teaching and learning (Veale et. al. 69).

As a move forward—in July of 2016 at Toronto Pride, the Ontario College of Teachers made available the first draft of the Additional Qualification (AQ)<sup>41</sup> course entitled, “Teaching LGBTQ Students.” As the first teacher qualification of its kind, the course outlines “the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for teaching LGBT students” (“Additional Qualification” 3); more specifically, the course delivers training to school professionals about safety issues, such as how to manage aggressions toward trans- students—a need identified by Quinn—and

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<sup>39</sup> Over fifty researchers, educators, service providers, medical professionals, and public policy developers from across Canada and the United States gathered in Toronto in May of 2012 for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Two-Spirit, Queer, and Questioning Youth Suicide Prevention Summit (Dyck 3). The Summit report, prepared by Dyck, lists twenty recommendations for the prevention of suicide among LGBTQ youth in Canada (3).

<sup>40</sup> *Being Safe, Being Me* is the national report of a trans youth health survey that studied the health issues and life experiences of 923 trans youth across Canada (Veale et. al. 2).

<sup>41</sup> Additional Qualification (AQ) courses, according to the Ontario College of Teachers, “allow members to expand their knowledge and skills within divisions and subjects in which they are already qualified or to acquire knowledge in new subject areas” (“Additional Qualification” 3).

encourages educators to self-reflect on their own “beliefs, biases, stereotypes, attitudes and actions, as well as those in society” (“Additional Qualification” 6-7). This course has been a long time coming, with initial consultations that can be traced back to November of 2009, when the College Council was concerned that the needs of LGBT students were not being sufficiently addressed (“Additional Qualification” 3). While there is a downside of this being a stand-alone course—gender appears as an isolated issue—and one that is not mandatory, hence the *additional* part, still it is a productive move forward.

In my own teacher training, as mentioned, I experienced an overwhelming absence of dialogue around trans- peoples’ lives. Since then, I have learned that “education for educators need not stop after the end of a teacher-education program” (Carr 94). There is an assumption that teacher education ends once the degree has been conferred; however, teachers must see the support needs of trans- and gender nonconforming students as a necessary part of their job (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 235). In other words, educators must take seriously the idea of self-directed learning beyond teacher training, with ongoing self-reflection and inquiry into the seemingly natural male-female gender binary and the questioning of those social practices that reinforce the binary. This suggestion—to see self-reflection (and education) as ongoing—means lifelong learning. As Kumashiro notes, “working to bring about change in oneself as well as in society can be very labor intensive, and may need to be a process that happens year-round and not only in isolated and rare moments. There is no final point of completion” (“Posts’ Perspectives” 8).

### 5.3 Provide Access to Information

You know, having– being able to answer specific questions that trans students would have, so you know, like, “Okay, I’m trans, what do I need to do, how do I transition and everything,” like... We have the internet, but the internet is full of incredibly contradicting information. It’s having– being able to have a high school

teacher who you can turn to and trust and have answers or be able to point you in the direction of answers, would be... *huge*. (Evy)

This suggestion calls for a teaching practice that provides access to information for transitioning students. It asks that educators be a resource, a touchstone. Providing trans- youth with access to information might look like taking on the role of a ‘connector’—an educator who identifies and connects youth with community resources and service providers. For many trans- youth, access to competent healthcare so that they may transition, socially and/or physically, is critical (Dyck 7); in fact, Dyck’s report finds that early access to resources for those who are planning to medically transition (i.e. involving hormones and/or surgery) is a protective factor against suicide (7). As such, educators should make available information about navigating the healthcare system; this may involve referrals to community organizations that can provide the contact names of medical professionals who deliver effective and dignified services and who *do not* work from a ‘disorder model’<sup>42</sup> when it comes to trans- youth. Providing trans- youth with access to information might also look like school knowledge that is expanded to include positive representations of trans- people in the curriculum—representations that appreciate the struggles and celebrations of trans- peoples’ lives and histories. ‘School knowledge’ is described by Jean Anyon in her research on the schooling of working-class children. Even though Anyon’s research is focused on a different context, her understanding of school knowledge applies here: “[School knowledge] reveals which groups have power, and demonstrates that the views of these groups are expressed and legitimized in the school curriculum. It can also identify social groups

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<sup>42</sup> In the ‘disorder model’ trans- youth are seen as individuals with psychiatric disorders rather than as individuals with unique needs. As Serano notes, receiving the diagnosis of ‘Gender Identity Disorder’ (GID), which was re-classified as ‘Gender Dysphoria’ in the updated Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), involves a “real-life test” monitored by medical gatekeepers that trans- people must pass to be eligible for hormone replacement therapy and/or sex reassignment surgery (otherwise known as sex confirmation surgery) (120-22). For a discussion of the politics of medical transitioning, see Serano, chapter 7.

that are not empowered by the [...] social patterns in the society: they do not have their views, activities, and priorities represented in the school curriculum (49).

Evy pointed out to me the gap in school knowledge about transgender people—she recalled in some detail her school-based encounters with transgender identity:

A lot of it was lack of information, like, I didn't really know what transgender was. I didn't have any idea, like, there might have been, you know, one or two, you know, *scary rumours* about these *weird* surgeries you can get, and, you know... I think we may have watched one movie or something, you know, the stereotypical sad trans movie where this poor person is transitioning and their life turns terrible but it was more just [quickly] *Wow this movie's really sad and confusing*. There wasn't any explanation of, "This is what transgender is, some people here might have questions about it." I didn't know it was a thing that I could identify as.

In reading the youths' narratives, it became apparent that their years in high school were marked by a lack of relevant and positive information (and representations) around transgender identity. Sandra Schmidt's research highlights the absence and unknowability of LGBTQ people in kindergarten through to grade twelve functions of the school—LGBTQ issues, identities, and persons are missing from school knowledge (254). Schmidt goes on to suggest that, "absence marginalizes; it reproduces heterosexuality as normal and non-heterosexual identities recognizable only in opposition" (254). At the same time, educative approaches that focus purely on those identities in opposition, referred to as 'others' (those who have been traditionally marginalized), tend to dodge critical investigation of normative gender scripts (Britzman 156-8). School knowledge, in Deborah Britzman's view, should be expanded to implicate straight and cis-gender students by investigating their own notions of gender and sexuality and in doing so, build awareness around their attachments to privilege (and oppression) (157-8). Drawing on Britzman, Short puts it this way: "mandated curriculum change is needed that also implicates the privilege and social rank of heterosexual students so that queer content in the curriculum is not merely 'inclusive,' thereby leaving privilege unchallenged" ("Don't Be So Gay!" 101).

These scholars call for educators to *consistently* interrupt the male-female gender binary system so that the transfer of knowledge about trans- peoples' lives is not straightforwardly received by students in their (unchallenged) normative positions (“Don’t Be So Gay!” 230); namely, studies of gender and sexuality, which should go beyond dominant gender scripts, must be intertwined with all learning opportunities—bodies in biology class, literature that students read, and math problems that chart inequalities, as examples (Schmidt 254). Put differently, ‘queer’ content cannot be simply attached to a lesson plan as a “*part* – a lower or different part – of an undistributed hierarchical arrangement of privilege” (“Don’t Be So Gay!” 230; emphasis mine). Curriculum reform must involve ongoing, across-the-board dialogue about, and encounters with trans- identities—trans- peoples’ lives and histories cannot be contained in a one-time lesson plan (Carr 82, 95). It is educators who are left to extract learning goals and general topics from the curriculum and from there, determine whether their lessons will embrace gender and sexual diversity, especially in Ontario where provincial curriculum documents do not mention specific content to be covered (Frohard-Dourlent 65).

When I spoke with Quinn, they described their encounter with a (problematic) teaching approach to health class:

Like my teacher, for gym, was an older lady – she actually retired the year after, uh, I was through her class – and her health class was very, um, heteronormative, like very, “You go through puberty and you get your period” [laughter]. It was no regard for trans individuals or, um, even people with physical deformities that make it so they *don’t* get their periods – ‘cause not everyone does – and, even like sometimes she made jokes at the expense of trans people. Um, I– It was a while ago so I don’t have any like specific... like, one time, she’d use terms like ‘she-male’ and stuff like that, yeah... She retired, so, at least there’s that [laughter].

In Quinn’s experience, trans- individuals were overlooked in their health class, and so was any acknowledgement of the diverse and ever-changing bodies within a common identity—as Quinn observed, “even people with physical deformities that make it so they *don’t* get their periods –

‘cause not everyone does.” What this suggestion—to provide access to information—puts forward is that in order to make visible trans- peoples’ lives, curriculum reform is needed, beginning in the early grades. In September of 2015, as mentioned, Ontario’s Ministry of Education introduced an updated Health and Physical Education curriculum (Clark-Lepard 14; “The Ontario Curriculum” 6). The revised curriculum will reach all grade levels—from teaching consent in kindergarten to gender identity and gender expression in elementary and secondary school classrooms (Clark-Lepard 12-4). When I asked the youth about their perspectives on the updated Health and Physical Education curriculum in Ontario, they had much to say.

In Quinn’s view, the curriculum (and dialogue) may help to foster a better understanding and acceptance of trans- identity:

Well, with like the new curriculum that’s coming out I feel like that will help, at least *some*, because it’s acknowledging trans as an identity, which, will– I think a lot of people don’t understand; and, because they don’t understand it’s like scary or it’s weird or it’s– and I feel like if people could understand, like if it’s taught to them they’re less likely to be judgemental and, like, like you see it with like, there’s more people now who are accepting of gay marriage than there were like fifty years ago because it’s talked about, so people are like, “Yeah, who cares?” Some, not all people obviously, but...

When I talked with Sebastian, he made an observation about the potential for the updated curriculum to positively impact the lives of trans- youth:

I know the sex education curriculum has been changed, which is awesome. I am *so so so* very impressed with that. If that had been implemented when I was in school, oh my god I would not have the problems that I had leading up through school. There is going to be so many kids now that are going to look at, like, what’s on these slides and what’s on these posters and what’s being taught in their textbooks and like, “Hey, you know what, there’s a name for what I’m feeling right now. There’s a look to this. Hey, look, I match this picture but I don’t match those ones, and that’s okay because that’s in my textbook too.” Like you’re learning about more than just like guys have penises, girls have vaginas, end of story. Like... that’s awesome. So that’s probably the other big thing is definitely like changing the curriculum to include more diversity in terms of gender and sexuality because, you know, it’s not just straight people that have sex, it’s, you know, you have to educate about– Especially in this day and age, when it’s more common, more acceptable,



and it's more normal for someone to be breaking away from the typical like heterosexual normality that is our society.

In moving forward, we must expand and redraw school knowledge around gender with multiple and layered representations of trans- peoples' lived realities. This means bringing current issues into the classroom for critical discussion and debate (e.g. gender-neutral bathrooms in the U.S). This means including gender-variant resources in the school library and curriculum by offering or assigning books about gender nonconforming children and youth.<sup>43</sup> This means inviting guest speakers, showing films, and hanging posters and other visual aids around the school that affirm the identities of trans- youth (Sausa 25). Above all, this suggestion, while broad and open, asks that educators act as a 'connector' by referring youth to appropriate resources and develop classroom content that is reflective of trans- peoples' lives and histories.

#### 5.4 Stumble over Language

It's also a lot of, uh, word policing; I don't know if that's the right way to say it, you know like... Making sure people know, like, "These are words that are appropriate to use, these are words that aren't appropriate to use," like, when I came out to one of my friends as trans *here* at university like I had to explain that, "No, that term isn't a term that we use, like, it's not an appropriate term." And, it wasn't that they were trying to be insulting or rude, it was that it was genuine ignorance and not knowing, so you know, beyond just, you know trans, it goes beyond, you know, trans identity and beyond gender identity, beyond sexuality, like, you know, teaching them... It's a terribly hard habit to break, but um, it's important to try, right. The earlier you teach people that they should be trying to do that, the better. Like, it's almost the type of thing where you start that at elementary school and then you hope that you just like reinforce it in high school, but... 'cause high school students aren't the best at following directions [laughter]. (Evy)

This suggestion is about stumbling over language, essentially by making mistakes and asking questions (e.g. what gender pronouns do you use?) because mistakes and uncertainty can be bridges to teaching and learning to discuss differently. As educators, we need to talk about

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<sup>43</sup> There are several books available for teaching students about trans- and intersex identities, and gender nonconformity and sexual orientation as they relate to trans- people. See Jessica Herthel and Jazz Jennings's *I Am Jazz*; Katie Rain Hill's *Rethinking Normal: A Memoir in Transition*; Tanita S. Davis's *Happy Families*.

gender in less narrow terms in order to imagine and make legible the intricacies of humanness that transcend any one particular way of being gendered in the world—and these conversations must begin in elementary school, as Evy suggests. We need to model the idea that there are numerous trajectories from which students can formulate and negotiate a gendered subject position by pluralizing the number of differences, instead of restricting identities through definition and categorization (Butler “Gender Trouble” 172-3; Lorber 321-4). Educators are well placed in schools to initiate dialogue that can broaden understandings of, and the language from which to talk about, gender.

When I talked with Sebastian about his gender identity from high school, he mentioned that transgender identity was not named in his school:

When I was in high school I didn’t know what transgender was. There was definitely always something that I knew was going on, but I didn’t have a name to put to it.

Sebastian’s experience reminds me of how everyday language often fails us, in that there are not enough words, or the words that we do have fall short when trying to account for the complexities of gender. In Lydia Sausa’s study of trans youths’ recommendations for improving the school system, the youth reported that the language used by school professionals is “too rigid and not inclusive of experiences that extend beyond the dichotomy of male/female or man/woman” (18). Frohard-Dourlent’s research finds that educators are indeed implicated in the normalization and enforcement of gender-specific language in school, which has a direct impact on the day-to-day experiences of trans- students, especially where teachers show “(dis)comfort through their assumptions about, and interactions with, students (i.e. using incorrect pronouns)” (65). An example from my own teaching experience is the gendered way that I habitually addressed students to get their attention—by saying ‘hey guys!’ I offer this as an example in how

stumbling over language and making mistakes as an incomplete and fragmented human led me to want to learn more, to discuss, and to do things differently (Shields 119); thus, I researched and read about a local Ontario kindergarten teacher who identifies as transgender and “challenge[s] those wee developing minds to think about what it really means to be a boy, or a girl, or something in between. Or rather, to simply be an individual without a label and identity constrained in a tidy little box” (Stepan n.p.). After learning about this teacher’s approach, I started using gender-neutral language in the classroom— ‘hey folks!’—and I continually self-reflect on my unfinishedness as an educator. This highlights the transformative possibilities of education and reminds me that we are all works-in-progress, uncertain, and becoming subjects.

When I asked Quinn to address their specific experience with gendered language in school, they discussed what it was like to have their non-binary identity and pronouns ignored:

When I would tell someone my identity and pronouns and they just like completely ignore it. *Or they ask me* and continue to completely ignore it, that one’s worse, because of like why would you bother asking me if you don’t want to know or you’re not going to respect it. Because if someone doesn’t know I’m not going to like hold it against them and be like “How could you not automatically know?” right [laughter]. But, um, if someone’s just ignoring it after I tell them that’s going to bother me.

As the results of the Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey find, “youth who have a non-binary gender identity (and might use different pronouns than he or she) also face the additional barrier that people tend to be unfamiliar with gender-neutral pronouns, which can complicate the process of asking people to use different pronouns” (Veale et. al. 68). The silence of educators also speaks volumes; namely, an educator’s refusal to interject in moments of misgendering—calling someone by their given name and inappropriate gender pronouns—can contribute to an unsupportive school environment for trans- youth (Frohard-Dourlent 67). Instead of gender policing students (or remaining silent in complicity), as educators, we should “develop broader

notions of what it means to be ‘male’ [and ‘female’] in schools” (Martino and Kehler). Gender cannot be neatly contained by the distinct categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ and with each only meaning one thing (Stryker et. al. 12); this involves critically examining gender as a term by which our identities are described, constituted, and circumscribed (Kelly “Module Six Part 1”; Lorber 324).

The reality is that gender nonconforming identities will emerge in educational spaces, even under the weight of constricting, normative gender scripts; however, if teachers and educational spaces refuse to affirm the identities of trans- students, then those students are made to feel like they have to disappear—often by dropping out of school entirely (Sausa 19). As an alternative to a teaching practice where trans- youth are “made to disappear,” more willingly, we need to affirm their gender identities (Stone 230-1). As such, we must acknowledge each student by their chosen name and pronouns on school records, identification, and diplomas. As Sausa notes, trans- youth self-identify “in many different ways and have constructed a language about their trans identities and experiences that is critical for educators to understand in order to provide effective outreach, education, and resources” (17-8).

When we begin to radically accept the beauty of this reality—the reality that more than two genders exist—then we can begin to listen to our students’ stories with a gentle curiosity and openness to emerging anew (Kelly “Module Six Part 1”). As educators, we should foster educational spaces where young people are free to explore the intricacies of gendered life that the heteronormative matrix cannot even begin to describe. We must approach teaching and learning with a new language and more robust vocabulary to describe the complexities of transgender, androgyny, gender fluidity, and intersex, and the vast range of other sex, gendered, and sexual subject positions (Lorber 321; Stryker 148). The proliferation of discourse—that can

result from asking questions and making mistakes—will hopefully expand our everyday language around gender so that trans- students can feel respected and supported.

### 5.5 Implement Gender-Neutral Washrooms and Change Rooms

Let's face it. It's going to be a really long time before we really get, um, before we really get our identities met within high schools. But, in terms of that, I suppose the big one, *big one, big one, big one*, gender-neutral bathrooms, or bathrooms that anybody can use; ones with locking doors. That's probably the number one thing. My— my experience being, you know, I would hold it in and hold it in 'cause I would not use those bathrooms, I didn't feel safe in those bathrooms, I didn't feel like I *fit* in the girls' bathroom, but I couldn't go into the boys' bathroom either because I was a girl and they were like, "No! Girls can't go into boys' bathrooms." So I couldn't go to the one I felt comfortable in and I couldn't go to the one that I was meant to go in. So to have bathrooms that everybody can use, that would probably be like the number one thing followed very closely by change rooms; to have change rooms that you can go into that you can use to feel safe in. (Sebastian)

The two spaces of schooling most commonly identified as unsafe for trans- youth are those which segregate students by exclusively male and female genders: washrooms and change rooms (Taylor et. al. 81). The kind of school culture that is supportive of trans- youth is the kind that makes gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms available. This suggestion does not concern school professionals as much as it does the organization of school spaces, more broadly.

Washrooms and change rooms can be a major source of tension amongst trans- youth because these facilities are divided along strict gender lines (Taylor et. al. 18). This hostile geographical mapping of the school forces students into a sort of survival navigation mode—as Sebastian's experience indicates: "I would hold it in and hold it in 'cause I would not use those bathrooms, I didn't feel safe in those bathrooms." For each of the youth interviewed, the need to make gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms available in school spaces was a common thread.

When I spoke with Quinn about their support needs from high school, they identified gender-neutral washrooms as something that schools should implement:

Like implementing, um, washrooms that, um, are gender-neutral, even if it's just one in the entire school, if they just change *one* of the washrooms into a gender-neutral washroom, that would help.

Sebastian conveyed a similar stance; he talked with me about gender-neutral washrooms and single-stall changing rooms:

'Cause a gender neutral bathroom or a bathroom that's, you know, anybody can use, or a change room that anybody can use or, even like, change rooms with stalls, even if you just put stalls in a change room as opposed to having it just wide open with a bunch of lockers. Like there's just— It's little things like that could make— You know even if they just put them in just like, you know, women's bathrooms or, uh, the girls change room and the guys change room, and like you could use the stalls if you needed to, even if you were, you know, physically female but were identifying as male, you could go into the girls change room and you could use the stalls and nobody had to see you, you didn't have to see anyone else. It may not have been the best, but you know what, it would have been a step in the right direction. Even just little tiny things like that, even the bathroom for the handicap student in the wheelchair, that was a blessing to me, and it wasn't even for me.

In some cases—as in Sebastian's experience—pragmatic supports were in place such as being allowed to use private, staff washrooms or washrooms for differently-abled students; using these washrooms may be a temporary solution, but is by no means a long term plan.

When I spoke with Evy about her experience with school washrooms, she described some of the tensions that transitioning youth brush up against:

With washrooms, it's, you know, it depends really where you are, in a way, you know. It's like if you're at the stage where you're still like presenting as your gender that you were born as, it's the kinda thing where it's like, you know, you go to the washroom of the gender you were born as [sigh]. You suck it up kind of thing, at least that's what I've been doing now, right. Um... It's a very scary thought going into the washroom of the gender that you're *supposed to be*, you know it's like, its, that's where you belong, but getting, uh, kicked out, you know, ostracized from an area where you're supposed to be able to go freely is kind of a scary thought.

For the youth interviewed here, the absence of gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms in school spaces appeared immediately threatening to their identities. Indeed, washrooms are sites

of gender regulation and monitoring, where trans-identified and non-binary youth often experience harassment and violence (Browne “Genderism” 332; Frohard-Dourlent 71).

When I talked with Quinn, they mentioned their encounter with violence in the space of the school washroom:

My school didn't [long pause] have any gender neutral bathrooms. No, they were all, um, men's or women's. Um, I would use the women's for obvious reasons, [quietly] since it's less, you know, I'm less likely to— It's how I appear. And, um, but I'd always go to the ones no one used, the ones way out of the way in the math department that no one ever went to [laughter]. Um, but, it was always very uncomfortable for me, um, and, I'd try to, like, make sure no one was in the washroom before I went in, um, because, uh, I did get, um, like violently attacked in grade ten in the washroom.

For gender nonconforming youth like Quinn, the experience of harassment and violence in school washrooms and change rooms is all too common. In the student climate survey, *Every Class in Every School*, over half of the trans-identified students who participated in the survey identified these spaces as particularly unsafe (Taylor et. al. “Every Class” 80-1). The Canadian Trans Youth Health Survey, which also studied trans- youths' perspectives on safety and violence at school, found that the youth surveyed felt least safe in school washrooms and change rooms (Veale et. al. 57). In Sausa's study, several of the trans- youth interviewed cited problems with gender-segregated school facilities that separate students based on gender (20). As such, washrooms and change rooms constitute key spaces for potential transformative intervention in school environments.

Implementing easily accessible gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms can mitigate these concerns in a way that does not single out trans- youth because they would be available for any student to use. The LGBTQ Youth Summit report recommends that Canadian schools rethink the physical structure and layout of their facilities in order to provide spaces that ensure the safety of trans- youth (Dyck 9). Trans- students should be able to move freely in the

school environment, as Evy put it. This suggestion—to implement gender-neutral washroom and change rooms—calls for a compassionate and socially just pedagogy that “[sees] the possibility for social change—realize[s] that settings are rich and social movements happen somewhere—and [...] amend[s] spaces that might otherwise be exclusionary” (Schmidt 271).

I close this suggestion with a narrative passage from Sebastian; when I talked with him about schools spaces and accommodations for trans- youth, in regards to gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms, he described his hope moving forward:

I’m hoping that, you know, that changes in the future because that would save *a lot* of issues for a lot of students who, you know, like me, were, you know, hurting themselves to not have to deal with that kind of thing, or letting their grades suffer, or themselves suffer for not having these same kind of accommodations as everyone else. It’s kind of like in a sense, if you’re— Like the way I looked at it while I was— I felt like I had some kind of, like, illness or disability to myself that was invisible that nobody believed was an actual thing, so nobody could accommodate for it, and I didn’t know what it was so I couldn’t accommodate for it. It was like being blind folded, spun around, and tossed down a waterslide; it was absolutely crazy and you’re scared and it’s dark and you don’t know what to do or where you’re going or how to deal with it.

## 5.6 Chapter Conclusions

Within the space of this chapter, I traced some of the more pressing and applicable suggestions posed by the youth that I interviewed. The youth were adamant that action is needed and yet understood that no single suggestion can do it all; the move forward must be holistic change. In order for change to occur, it must happen at multiple levels, both individually and structurally—from classroom teachers through each school to the school boards, and within legislation and policy (Dyck 3; Sausa 24; Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 233-4). The suggestions outlined here require resources, time, and passion to implement and they may play out differently in practice; nevertheless, these suggestions comprise an initial plan for moving forward in the direction of a more compassionate and socially just pedagogy.



The goal is to improve the quality of education for trans-identified students in public high schools by seeing hope and acting “in ways that demonstrate that something can be done” (Carr 94). As such, we need to listen to young trans- peoples’ stories, so that we may be better able to understand what we *could* do or *should* do as educators. We cannot afford to position trans-youth as problems to be solved; rather, these youth must be validated and supported on their own terms (Frohard-Dourlent 69). I hope this list of suggestions has provided information that can enable educators—from teacher education students to long-time teachers—to be more effective in addressing the support needs of trans- youth in schools. Even though schools can be considered sites where the male-female gender binary system is “continually vouched for and privileged [...] this is not an inevitable or unchangeable role” (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 109). I have come to learn that education is an institution built around knowledge production and relational practices, and so its capacity to resist and displace the existing normative social order is huge (Kelly “A Final Note”). Above all, educators, along with their students, must be engaged in the solutions for change.

## 5.7 Chapter Summary

The content of this chapter was a list of suggestions for moving forward, that emerged from the youths’ narratives, on the subject of how schools can do better to support trans- youth. In the next chapter, the concluding chapter, I provide a summary of the research and its limitations, and then consider directions for future research.

## Chapter 6: Conclusions

To begin the concluding chapter, I share a quote from Susan Gapka, a Toronto-based community and political organizer on trans issues. Gapka was a guest speaker at a community meeting that I attended in my hometown in Ontario entitled, “Speak Out! Prioritizing Trans Identities.” At this meeting, held in February of 2016, Gapka addressed a number of issues that are impacting this generation (and will impact the next generation) of trans- youth and, from there, encouraged the trans- folks and service providers in attendance to: “send ripples of hope because I just don’t know if there is any other option” (“Speak Out!”). How I interpret this is that the marginalization of trans- youth is stark and urgent.<sup>44</sup> What is more, to ‘send ripples of hope’ means not giving up on those who are marginalized, by seeking to understand who is able to speak and whose voice is silenced, how power operates to privilege some but not others, and why certain people are more comfortably positioned in the world whereas others face systemic barriers (Carr 93). In response, this research nudges at rather than forecloses dialogue of potential openness and hope (Kelly “Module Six Part 1”).

I also think about “reading the world” with an eager curiosity around the familiar and everydayness in education (Freire and Macedo 20-2); this means leaning in to moments that *rupture* the male-female gender binary so that trans-identified and non-binary youth can move in and through school spaces—we need more “bold interruption[s] of educational business as usual” (Greenwood 2). I follow bell hooks when I say that we should consider education a “location of possibility” because there are always already opportunities for transforming the gendered spaces of schooling (207). With that said, I hope to initiate a stirring in all of us, an incitement to move beyond the idea that every person navigates social landscapes in the exact

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<sup>44</sup> This has been well documented in school-based studies involving trans- youth. See Donn Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 116; Catherine Taylor et. al. “Every Class” 28.

same way. As such, this research serves as a kind of call-in—an invitation to continuously teach (and learn) about the complexities, differences, and vulnerabilities that make up each of our lives. Above all, insights that center on *what matters to trans- youth* are important and necessary in a move toward doing things differently.

## 6.1 Research Summary

Given the certain ‘nowness’ around safe space, with its shift into popular usage in education, I became interested in learning more about the concept; I wondered about its beginnings, its trajectory, and the impact it has on the school day. My specific purpose within this study was to open up the many meanings of safe space. I did not set out to assess the safeness of school spaces or criticize safe school policies, but to *risk the obvious*—to engage with the familiar and the everydayness in education.

This study was designed to address the following research question: *What are trans-youths’ meanings around, and experiences of, safe space from high school?* To answer this question, qualitative data was gathered from semi-structured interviews conducted with young trans-identified and non-binary individuals (ages 19-24) who have recently attended a public secondary school in Ontario. I used the method of narrative inquiry for analyzing the interview data because it allowed me to center a youth perspective by focusing on depth and detail in each narrative. I approached data collection and analysis with the view that trans- youth are the most knowledgeable experts on their own experiences and lives and that these youth are best suited to answer the question of this thesis. I also grounded this research in a theoretical framework guided by geographies of sexualities and trans- geographies, along with Massey’s formulation of the politics of space. By doing so, I was able to consider how the youths’ experiences in school spaces were affected by social dynamics, just as the social affected their spatial experiences.

An exploration of the phenomenon of safe space reveals the following findings. The idea of ‘safeness’ alone appears transparent and simple, as if there could only be one understanding of it; however, this research finds that the definitional boundaries around safe space are intriguingly complex, rather elusive, mutable, imperfect, fragile, contradictory, and yet full of possibility. In other words, safe space is not completely knowable or neatly straightforward—there is no perfect mould or recipe and the concept is certainly not universalizable (Rosenfeld and Noterman 1354-5). In this study, each youths’ encounters in, and relationships to, school spaces was unique, which makes it difficult, and not necessarily ideal, to secure a single, definitive understanding of safe space. Moreover, the frequent appeal to safe space in discussions around zero-tolerance policies, anti-bullying measures, and security and control of the school environment tends to foreclose other ways of knowing the concept; safe space as rooted in this kind of ‘protectionist’ education rhetoric is not necessarily reflective of the perspectives of the youth in this research, whose meanings around, and experiences of, safe space cross over many boundaries with various attachments—Evy understands safe space as meaning comfort and discreteness, Quinn talks about the importance of safe space as the baseline and as somewhere to exist without feeling wrong, and Sebastian associates safe space with relations among people and the smell of turpentine in the art classroom, which he considered his ‘safe haven’. Therefore, Canada’s education system might be better served by conceptualizing safety more broadly—beyond security and control of the school environment—and in a way that considers trans- youths’ school-based realities. Following these findings, we might begin to appreciate the many meanings of safe space.

In a significant way, this research is about how safe space is understood and experienced by the young people that I talked to, but equally it is about finding ways to move forward and do

things differently. Therefore, I also tried to demonstrate how schools, specifically educators, might do better in supporting trans- youth by offering an action piece in the form of a list of suggestions. The youth who shared their stories are the experts at identifying some of the challenges and barriers they faced in high school and the actions required to address the support needs of trans- youth. The following are amongst the most effective ways for schools to address the kinds of concerns that the youth have identified in this thesis: (1) accept that we all have a social location—here, the youth underlined the importance of accepting social locations of difference; (2) see self-reflection and education as ongoing—I looked at the hazards of the fixed position, and following the youths’ advice, encourage educators to nurture their own self-reflection and ongoing education for professional development.; (3) provide access to information—I discussed the youths’ call for educators to provide access to information and resources for transitioning students. I also addressed school knowledge via the curriculum that frames us in Ontario; (4) stumble over language—this suggestion asks that we talk about gender in less narrow terms; and (5) implement gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms—this was one of the most relevant and significant needs identified by the youth: the need to make gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms available in school spaces.

The ideas raised in the youths’ narratives also speak to much larger issues around how the education system should respond to shifting notions of safety for trans- people in Ontario, and Canada more broadly. At the time of my writing this thesis, this kind of shift is taking place through law and policy reform. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s Liberal Government has proposed legislation that would protect the legal and human rights of transgender people across Canada (Wherry n.p.). Bill C-16, introduced in the House of Commons in May of 2016, would amend the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code to include both ‘gender identity’

and ‘gender expression’ (Wherry n.p.). An article by CBC News indicates that “the inclusion of gender identity in the Canadian Human Rights Act has been at least 12 years in the making” (Wherry n.p.). If change holds, this legislative response may indeed ‘send ripples of hope’ to trans- youth in Canadian schools—the oppression of, and violence toward, trans- people will be reconfigured as broader social issues with legal repercussions. In other words, the delivery of education in Canada would have to take seriously the legal rights and visibility of trans- youth, thereby guaranteeing their safety through the disruption and transformation of normative gender regimes in school culture.

## 6.2 Limitations

In this section, I turn to a discussion of what was outside the bounds of this study. In particular, I consider some of the general limitations and methodological issues of this research, including matters with recruitment. *What are some of the shortcomings in the study that I designed and conducted?*

The relatively small number of interview partners that I recruited is a limitation (and strength) of this research. As mentioned in the methodology chapter, the scope of this study was limited because the three interview narratives that I collected are not representative of the experiences and lives of *every* trans- youth. Therefore, the study of a greater number of narratives might have produced different, more comprehensive results. At the same time, my focus on a small sample provided the starting point from which to expand understandings of safe space beyond its use in education policy. I followed the methodological stance of a narrative researcher and thus devoted more space in the study to fewer individuals (Chase 666). In doing so, I avoided over-collecting data, which could have resulted in abstract claims and sweeping generalizations in the analysis stage (Foss and Waters 48).

Another limitation of this study concerns the self-report method that I used, where the youth interviewed were reporting on their school-based experiences, not contemporaneously, but as they remember them. Therefore, the self-report method is limited because the youth are looking back upon and shaping stories about their years in high school from distant positions (as high school graduates). Because this study focused on youths' recollections it does not give an accurate representation of current high school spaces, as lived out day-to-day. The youth in this study talked about their experiences from a specific environment (i.e. post-secondary institution) and thus with a certain level of privilege, which suggests their experiences may not be relevant to trans- youth in other environments and in other positions (i.e. high school enrolled students).

The Western lens from which I approached the research is another possible limitation of this study. In particular, the data analyzed present a Western perspective on safe space and the ways in which I trace the beginnings and trajectory of safe space follows a Western context. Therefore, interviews with youth from other cultures and in other parts of the world might have generated more diverse perspectives and as such, different results.

While some limitations to this study exist, it nonetheless reaches its goal: to explore the many meanings of safe space through the narratives of trans-identified and non-binary youth. In what follows, I discuss possible directions for future research that pick up on ideas left behind by the limitations.

### 6.3 Future Research

The limitations of this research leave behind loose threads of inquiry from which future research may be carried out. This section describes some of those directions for future research. *How can I build on this research? What other avenues of exploration does this research lead to?*

It would be worthwhile to study the meanings and experiences of safe space in the lives of trans-identified and non-binary youth who are presently immersed in high school culture. While exploring safe space in the lives of current high school students was outside the scope of this research because of issues related to practicality and confidentiality, still it could have yielded interesting findings and so, for me, remains a future area of study. Adding to that, a more comprehensive study (with a greater number of participants) that traces the experiences of trans-youth over time is also worthy of future investigation; this kind of longitudinal approach might interview youth at different life stages to map their changing understandings of safe space. Along with that, qualitative interviews with trans- youth in other parts of the world could produce interesting data, especially where safe space rhetoric in education might not exist or has other attachments and is thus experienced and imagined differently from the youth involved here.

Another thread of inquiry entails studying the perspectives of trans-identified youth who are attending religious-affiliated schools. Safe school legislation in Ontario, such as the *Accepting Schools Act*, applies to both publically funded and denominational separate schools, which highlights the need for a study of the spatial experiences of youth in Catholic School Boards (Short “Don’t Be So Gay!” 95, 234); this kind of research might consider the relationship between safe space and religious-based pedagogy.

Further, a key idea emerged that did not relate directly to the research question but can yield information that is important for understanding the school-based lives of trans- youth. To elaborate, two of the trans-identified youth that were interviewed, Evy and Sebastian, described some factors in their places of schooling that made it impossible for them to self-identify their gender in high school as anything other than ‘male’ or ‘female.’ Both noted the absence of dialogue around transgender identity—it was never named—and the lack of information and



resources around transitioning; as Sebastian put it: “When I was in high school the care that I got was *none* for transgender.” I found this common thread very compelling, but clearly in need of a separate study.

#### 6.4 A Final Note

When I set out on this research journey, I acknowledged the likelihood that my methodology and theoretical framework might shift and/or change. As such, I abandoned a rigid direction to instead value a wandering, albeit thorough and careful, research process (Foss and Waters 59). I have come to learn that the study of social phenomena can be slow and non-linear. My dedicated interest in, and motivation for, ‘doing’ this research, however, has resulted in its completion—and yet the (re)search to open up the many meanings of safe space is not done for, as mentioned, I have questions that may never be fully and completely answered. Most of all, I hope this research has shaken up what we think we know about safe space.

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## Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Title: Trans- Youth Matter(s): An Exploration of the ‘Safe’ Space Phenomenon

Researcher: Erin Mobley  
Master of Gender Studies Candidate  
Department of Gender Studies  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
em7255@mun.ca

Co-Supervisor(s): Dr. Vicki Hallett  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Gender Studies  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
(709) 864-2376  
vshallett@mun.ca

Dr. Elizabeth Yeoman  
Professor  
Department of Education  
Memorial University of Newfoundland  
(709) 864-3411  
eyeoman@mun.ca

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled “Trans- Youth Matter(s): An Exploration of the ‘Safe’ Space Phenomenon.”

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, Erin Mobley, if you have any questions about the study or would like more information before you consent.

### **Introduction:**

I am a Master’s (MGS) candidate in the Department of Gender Studies at Memorial University of Newfoundland, and I am asking for your participation in the research project, entitled “Trans- Youth Matter(s): An Exploration of the ‘Safe’ Space Phenomenon.” As part of my Master’s thesis, I am conducting research under the co-supervision of Dr. Vicki Hallett and Dr. Elizabeth Yeoman. This form is part of the process of obtaining informed consent from research participants. This form will provide you with information about the research, including what would be involved in participation if you choose to participate. You will be provided with a copy of this consent form.

**Purpose of the research:**

My research goal is to notice the ways the concept of ‘safe’ space gets talked about in relation to education, particularly by exploring its situatedness in the context of high school spaces in Ontario. Even though safe space is operationalized in school policy in particular ways and with specific intentions, it might mean something very different to the young people navigating actual high school spaces. To accomplish this goal, my thesis research will qualitatively map the spatial experiences of trans-identified youth (ages 19-24) who have recently attended high school in Ontario. Through a kind of critical unraveling of its meanings within the personal experience narratives of trans-identified students, I want to get at safe space with a below-the-surface examination.

**Research Procedure:**

I will be conducting individual interviews which will involve being asked a predetermined list of questions guided by particular topics, and engaging in a conversation based on your responses to these questions.

**Time Commitment:**

Individual interviews will take approximately 60 minutes.

**Withdrawal from the study:**

Participants can stop and/or end their participation in the research during or after the interview with no consequence to the participant now, or in the future. Should you choose to withdraw after data collection has ended (e.g. by removing the interview transcript several months after it was recorded), your data can be removed from the study up to the cut-off date of February 1 2016. If you withdraw before this date, all data collected from you up to that point will be deleted from my personal computer and not used in the thesis, MGS public presentation, and/or any future publications. After February 1 2106, data cannot be removed because it will already be prepared for my thesis.

**Potential Benefits:**

Your participation will guide the outcome of the research and contribute to growing research in academic fields such as Gender Studies and Education. As such, your involvement will expand awareness of the school-based lived realities of trans- youth and perform a practical relevance piece that can impact the well-being and support needs of trans- youth in Ontario high schools.

**Potential Harms:**

Because of the sensitive nature of topics being discussed, potential harms may include emotional and/or psychological risk. If at any point and for any reason you wish to take a break or terminate the interview please bring this to my immediate attention. I am prepared to provide referral information for personal counselling at the university and in the community.

**Confidentiality:**

The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants’ identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use, or disclosure. In compliance with the ethical guidelines of research governed by Memorial University of Newfoundland, I aim to protect the confidentiality to the best of ability throughout the research and in future

publications. Only my co-supervisors and I will have access to the interview data, which will be confidentially stored in a separate folder on my secure personal computer (requiring a password to access) for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University's policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research.

**Anonymity:**

Should you wish to remain anonymous you have the option of selecting a chosen pseudonym to be used in direct quotations from your interview or in any future publications and/or public presentations of the research. It is possible that, despite the use of a pseudonym for direct quotations, other research participants and/or members of the McMaster University community might be able to identify which direct quotations belong to you, based on what you have said.

**Recording of Data:**

All interviews will be audio recorded.

**Storage of Data:**

All interview data will be confidentially stored on Erin Mobley's secure personal computer for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University's policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research, after which all materials will be destroyed.

**Reporting of Results:**

The interview data will be published in my Master's thesis and will be presented at the Department of Gender Studies Speakers' Series during the winter term of 2016. The information gathered in this study may also be used in future research, conference presentations, and/or publications.

**Sharing of Results with Participants:**

Participants can obtain an electronic, read-only copy of the final thesis should they request it. The thesis will also be publically available online through Memorial's QEII library.

**Questions:**

You are welcome to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research. Should you wish to clarify matters pertaining to your participation in the research or the project more generally, please contact Erin Mobley (em7255@mun.ca) and/or my co-supervisor(s): Dr. Vicki Hallett (vshallett@mun.ca), Dr. Elizabeth Yeoman (eyeoman@mun.ca).

**Consent:**

By signing this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

Participant:

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (research participant) allow Erin Mobley (MGS candidate) to use the voluntary given data described below for the purpose of research toward the completion of the Master of Gender Studies thesis for the Department of Gender Studies, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NL, Canada.

- I have read and understand the above information about the research.
- I have been given the opportunity to ask Erin Mobley questions about the research and am satisfied with the answers to all of my questions.
- I understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- I consent to participation in an individual interview.
- I consent to being audio recorded in an individual interview.
- I agree to the use of direct quotations.
- I understand that there is no obligation to answer any question that I feel is invasive, offensive, or inappropriate.
- I consent to the use of a chosen pseudonym to be used in publications and/or public presentations of the research.
- I consent to the research using information gathered in this study in future research and/or publications.
- I understand that, should I withdraw from the study, I can have my interview data removed up to the cut-off date of February 1 2016, after which the data cannot be removed because it will already be prepared for publication.
- I understand that if I choose to end participation during data collection, any data collected from me up to February 1 2016 will be deleted.
- I understand that I may obtain a copy of the final thesis should I request it.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Name (Print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Researcher:

I, Erin Mobley, have explained the study to the best of ability. I invited questions and provided answers. I have made clear the ways in which the information gathered here may be used and am satisfied that the participant fully understands the study and any potential risks.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.



## **Appendix B: Interview Topics and Guiding Questions**

Interviews to occur with voluntary participants (ages 19-24) who attended a publically-funded secondary school in Ontario, with the goals of:

1. Focusing on the personal experience narratives of trans-identified youth to explore the many meanings around safe space in high schools in Ontario
2. Identifying the attachments, gaps, failures, vitality of safe space in the context of high school spaces in Ontario

### **The interviews will:**

Be scheduled in a quiet location and at a time that is most convenient for interview partners  
Last for approximately 60 minutes in length  
Be audio recorded and then transcribed at a later date

### **Additional Notes:**

The questions are meant to act as a guide for the discussion and may not all be asked. Additional questions may be asked depending on the direction of the interview.

### **Introduction:**

Ask the interview partner their name and pronouns  
Read through the consent form with interview partner  
Ask if they would provide their email address and/or phone number should they wish to have further input in the research (i.e. follow-ups about direct quotes from interviews)

### **Topic One: Identity (with respect to intersectionality)**

1. Can you begin by telling me who you are? (Describe yourself. How do you spend your time, what interests you?)
2. Can you describe how you identify? (Gender, sexuality, race, ability, religion, class, language, heritage, etc).
3. Are the ways you identify now different from when you were a high school student?
4. Do you see any connections between your gender identity and your experiences as \_\_\_\_\_ (other social locations they identify with)?

### **Topic Two: Information about your High School**

1. What year did you graduate high school?
2. Where is/are the high school(s) located? Urban, rural?
3. Was/were the high school(s) public, private, religious-affiliated?
4. Does/did your high school have an extra-curricular club, group, and/or organization for LGBTQ students? And, were you involved with the club?

### **Topic Three: Meaning(s) of Safe Space**

1. Where did you first learn about safe space?

2. What does safe space mean to you?
3. How would you understand safe space?
4. When/where did you hear the phrase safe space being talked about in your high school?
5. Was safe space something that mattered to you in high school?
6. Do you think creating a safe space is a desirable thing to do? Why, or why not?

**Topic Four: Experience(s) of Safe Space**

1. Describe a space from your high school that you considered a safe space.
2. Describe some of your experiences of navigating specific high school spaces (i.e. washrooms, gym class, hallways, classrooms, and arriving and leaving the school)?

**Topic Five: Negotiation(s) of Safe Space**

1. Were there any barriers to moving through your high school spaces?
2. What are your specific needs that you feel were or were not addressed by your high school?
3. Did your experiences in high school spaces have any impact on your academic achievement?
4. How can high school spaces affirm the identities of trans- youth?
5. How can teachers, specifically, support trans- youth in high school spaces?
6. What do your ideal high school safe spaces look like?

**Close the interview:**

1. Are there any questions that you wish I had asked?
2. Is there anything else you would like to say?
3. Do you have any questions that you would like to ask of me?

Thank you for your time.

Appendix C: Sample Recruitment Poster



**Memorial University of Newfoundland**

**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR  
RESEARCH IN GENDER STUDIES**

I am looking for **Trans-identified individuals (ages 19-24)** who **attended a public high school in Ontario** to take part in a study of **safe space**.

As a participant, you will be asked to share your meanings around and experiences of safe space from high school.

Your participation would involve *one individual interview*. The interview will be about *60 minutes* in length.

I will make a sincere effort to schedule the interview in a location of your choosing and at a time that is most convenient for you.

For more information about the research or to participate, please contact:

Erin Mobley

Masters Candidate, Department of Gender Studies, Memorial University

Email: [em7255@mun.ca](mailto:em7255@mun.ca)

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 709-864-2861.