Supporting Transgender Students and Gender-Expansive Education in Schools: Investigating Policy, Pedagogy, and Curricular Implications

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Abstract

Context/Background: This article provides an introduction to the special issue. It includes an overview of a collection of articles from scholars across the globe who are committed to deepening an understanding of the experiences of trans students and gender-expansive education in schools. The special issue grew out of concerns about the need to investigate a trans studies–informed approach to addressing trans marginalization that attends to questions of both gender and racial justice in K-12 schools—an approach that is much needed in the field. The special issue also emerges, and needs to be contextualized, in response to the current conditions of resurgent far-right extremism, with its accompanying anti-trans and white supremacist rhetoric.

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to provide both an introduction to the special issue and a rationale for its conception. It serves as an orientation to reading of the special issue as a whole, functioning as a synthesizing introduction: a point of reference and lens through which to situate the contributing articles in a dialogic relation to mark a distinctive assemblage in the field both within and beyond the North American context.

Keywords
Critical trans politics, gender-expansive education, transgender, trans students, trans marginalization in schools

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Introduction to the Special Issue

This special issue brings together a collection of articles and contributors from Australia, Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It contributes to an emerging body of research internationally that focuses on the experiences of transgender and gender diverse students in the education system, the institutional barriers that impede the creation of building trans-inclusive climates and safe spaces in schools for gender diverse students, and educators’ responses to demands for recognition by trans students (Blackburn, 2021; Frohard-Dourlent, 2018; Jones et al., 2016; Kennedy, 2018; Luecke, 2011, 2018; Mangin, 2020; McBride & Neary, 2021; Martino et al., 2022; McGuire & Conover-Williams, 2010; miller, 2019; Neary, 2021; Paechter et al., 2021; Phipps & Blackall, 2021; Sinclair-Palm, 2017; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Travers, 2018; Ullman, 2021, 2014). This research is important, especially given the long history that has erased the focus on the “T” in studies purporting to focus on LGBT students in schools (Greytak et al., 2013). One of the early studies that documents the experiences of trans youth at school living in Toronto and across Ontario was by the Youth Gender Action Project (Y-GAP; 2009), a community-based initiative “committed to understanding and improving the lives of trans youth . . . [that] specifically highlighted how particular experiences are integral in shaping for better or worse the emotional and physical health and safety of trans youth.” This research corroborated the findings of previous studies on the school experiences of trans youth in the United States, which documented the frequent harassment, violence, and exclusion that trans youth experienced at school and drew attention to conditions of unlivability for these students (Greytak et al., 2009; Wyss, 2004). More recent research in the field has also highlighted that trans youth of color experience additional challenges because of the systemic racism they encounter in the education system, compounding the stress of transition (Truong et al., 2020).

These findings concur with national climate survey research conducted in Canada and in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia on the experiences of LGBTQ students in schools (Bradlow et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2018; Taylor & Peter, 2011; Ullman, 2021; Zongrone et al., 2020). For example, these reports detail widespread harassment endured particularly by transgender youth. Taylor and Peter (2011), for example, in their Canadian national survey, found that 74% of trans students experienced both physical and verbal harassment in schools. Such experiences are consistent with the findings reported in the United States (Kosciw et al., 2020), the United Kingdom (Bradlow et al., 2017), and Australia (Ullman, 2015). Instances of harassment were found to contribute to elevated rates of poor mental health, “with trans pupils at particular risk” (Bradlow et al., 2017, p. 30). Taylor and Peter (2011) specifically reported that:

- 62.2% of trans students “reported hearing transphobic comments about girls ‘not acting feminine enough’ every day or every week at school” (p. 51);
• 89.8% of trans students “were more likely to report hearing negative gender-related or transphobic comments daily or weekly from other students” (p. 52);
• 64.8% of trans participants “reported being verbally harassed about their gender” (p. 59);
• 31% of trans students were “twice as likely as other LGBTQ students and their non-LGBTQ peers to be verbally harassed about their ethnicity or race” (p. 59); and
• 37.1% of trans students “were much more likely than sexual minority or non-LGBTQ students to have been physically harassed or assaulted because of their gender expression” (p. 64).

In their follow-up climate survey study 10 years later, Peter et al. (2021) noted that although there have indeed been improvements in the development of more queer- and trans-inclusive policies and legislation being enacted, 2SLGBTQ (Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) students continue to be subjected to high levels of harassment. Research conducted in the United States by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) also reports high levels of transphobia in schools, with 87.4% of LGBTQ students indicating that they heard negative remarks specifically about transgender people (e.g., “tranny” or “he/she”), while 43.7% heard them often or frequently (see Kosciw et al., 2020, p. xix). However, Kosciw et al. (2020) found that in schools where there was evidence of a curriculum that was LGBTQ-inclusive, students were seemingly less likely to hear such negative remarks. However, Kosciw et al. (2018) found that “students were somewhat more likely to report inclusion of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) topics than transgender/gender nonconforming (trans/GNC) topics”; “only 6.7% received LGBTQ-inclusive education” that “included transgender and gender non-conforming topics” (p. 57). In fact, Peter et al. (2021) claimed that while school districts have enacted legislation policy that “went beyond punishing bullies to provide professional development and GSAs [Gender Sexuality Alliance Student Clubs]” (p. 8), there has been little support for LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum development and pedagogies.

It is such a context of research-based knowledge that informs the background and rationale for this special issue, with its focus on the need for further investigation into policy and pedagogical and curricular practices in schools that support trans and nonbinary children and youth in their everyday lives as students. We know from the existing research that attempts to support trans youth have tended to focus on a more individualized approach that relies on trans students being visible and declaring themselves as a catalyst for intervention and accommodation (Luecke, 2018; Mangin, 2020; Martino et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2016). We also know that teachers do not always feel that they have the requisite knowledge to be able to support trans students and to educate about gender expansiveness and what this entails (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2018; Leonardi & Staley, 2018; Payne & Smith, 2014; M. Smith & Payne, 2016). This special issue grew out of the need for further investigation into the enactment of specific policies and practices that are attentive to addressing the systemic institutional barriers
of transphobia, cisgenderism, and cissexism in schools, and cognizant of the need to educate about gender expansiveness (Airton, 2019; Human Rights Campaign Coalition & Gender Spectrum, 2014; Skurnik, 2016; Woolley & Airton, 2020).

The special issue also needs to be contextualized amid a wave of anti-trans legislation and rhetoric in the United States and elsewhere, which is driven by a virulent transphobic and cissexist necropolitical right-wing political agenda, with significant repercussions for trans students in schools and for educating about gender expansiveness. As Affonesca (2021) noted, the “effects of anti-trans legislation—and the rhetoric that accompanies it—[are] often seen in classrooms and schools across the country where students . . . combat discrimination, fear and harassment” (para. 7). More recently in Ohio, late into the night, the Republicans hijacked an unrelated bill to ban trans students from participating in sports (Schneck, 2022). It specifically targets trans girls, preventing them from participating in high school athletics, and entails “a verification process” of “checking the genitals” of those who are “accused” of being trans (Trau, 2022). In the UK, the government has introduced legislation to ban conversion therapy for cis gay, lesbian, and bisexual people, but does not include trans people and, it has been argued, will inevitably target gender nonconformity in young people (Ferreira, 2022). Evidence of anti-trans discourse also emerged in the lead-up to the 2022 Australian election and was mobilized to gain support from conservative voters. For example, a conservative senator introduced a bill to ban trans women from women’s sports and initially received backing from the prime minister (Karp, 2022). Another conservative candidate referred to an antibullying campaign targeting youth that is designed to raise awareness about “sexuality, sex and gender identity”—which was supported by the police in New South Wales—as a “grooming tactic” used by “gender extremists” (McGowan, 2022).

Such anti-trans rhetoric feeds into and fuels what Australian scholars Ferfolja and Ullman (2020) refer to as a “culture of limitation” with respect to addressing gender and sexuality diversity in schools. These scholars define such a culture as a “messy plethora of perspectives, beliefs and attitudes which come together at various points and contexts where they thwart the country’s development towards becoming a progressive and equitable society” (p. 3). They argue that such resistance to addressing gender and sexual diversity is no more pronounced than within the context of schools, where children and young people become the target of parental concern that denies their rights to self-determination. For example, we see this manifested in the “Don’t Say Gay” bills in the United States; at least 16 states have introduced “parental rights” legislation that bans discussion of LGBT topics in schools (S. E. Smith, 2022). Such legislation is not unlike that which bans the discussion of critical race theory and prevents depicting the United States as an essentially racist society, but it is important to note that this edict extends to “any discussions about conscious and unconscious bias, privilege and oppression” (Ray & Gibbons, 2021, para. 8). At least nine states have passed such legislation, with another 20 planning to do so. These developments raise important questions about what Spade (2015) refers to as a critical trans politics and how it interfaces with anti-racism and fits into larger anti-oppressive frameworks.
Although the legislative context in Canada is quite different, LGBTQ youth are not immune from the effects of such inimical anti-trans and racist discourses, with their effects materializing and manifesting most recently in the trucker “Freedom Convoy” protest that converged on the nation’s capital earlier this year. The truckers received funding from right-wing extremist groups and constituents in both Canada and the United States. The key organizers of this anti-government, anti-vaccine trucker protest have also been linked to anti-LGBTQ2S (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning, and Two Spirit) and white supremacist activist groups (Wells, 2022), which was manifested with a number of protestors waving Confederate flags and “flying an upside down Canadian flag with a swastika on it” (Pasiuk, 2022, para. 1). Similarly, while South Africa is known for its legal protections preventing discrimination against trans people, research documenting public opinion has reported that “the law means little when the communities that people live in still believe that transgender people should not be a part of those communities because they are ‘violating’ culture and tradition” (Luhur et al., 2021, p. 3). In addition, this research revealed that while 72% of participants believed that trans people should be protected from discrimination, 47.5% disagreed that transgender people should be permitted to use a washroom that aligned with their self-assigned gender identity. As the researchers noted, and as Bhana’s (2022) contribution to this special issue illuminates, these cissexist attitudes have been shaped by the impact of colonization and apartheid (Patel, 2017).

**Theoretical and Empirical Insights Into Trans Marginalization and Gender-Expansive Possibilities in Schools**

This special issue was conceived against this backdrop. It provides and extends significant theoretical and empirical insights into the recalcitrant and systemic barriers that continue to impact teachers in schools in their capacity to support trans students and, more broadly, what this means for enacting gender and racial justice in schools. In addition, there is a desubjugated focus on the experiences of trans and nonbinary students’ perspectives and experiences in schools. What is particularly salient about the special issue is that it brings together contributors from a range of different contexts and locales, with their particularities and specific cultures of limitation and trans policymescapes (Martino et al., 2019), to generate knowledge about the following:

- trans studies–informed frameworks for enhancing an understanding of gender expansiveness and gender justice in schools;
- teachers’ and administrators’ perspectives on trans-affirmative policies and gender-expansive education;
- the conditions that both lead to and hamper trans students’ capacity to prosper and thrive in the school system;
- the intersectional aspects of identity that impact the lives of trans students in schools; and
• the schooling experiences of trans students, gender-expansive education, and the impact of trans affirmative policies.

The first article, “A Transgender Studies Approach for Educators in Schools: Reflections on ‘Cissexist Pitfalls,’ Bifurcated Frameworks, and Racial Justice” (Martino), advocates for a trans studies–informed and critical trans political approach to fostering gender and racial justice in schools (Martino & Omercajic, 2021; Radi, 2019; Spade, 2015; Stryker, 2006). It identifies the hermeneutic resources afforded by trans studies as an interdisciplinary field in its potential to enhance and deepen an understanding of the pedagogical interventions that are needed to foster trans-affirming and gender-expansive education in schools. Attention is also drawn to a necessary engagement with decolonial critique of gender binary systems and a trans of color critique, which have particular salience given the resurgence of far-right extremism, with its accompanying anti-trans and white supremacist rhetoric.

The next three articles—by Payne and Smith ("Power, Emotion, and Privilege: ‘Discomfort’ as Resistance to Transgender Student Affirmation"); Martino, Omercajic, and Kassen ("We Have No ‘Visibly’ Trans Students in Our School"); and Bhana ("Primary School Teachers Misrecognizing Trans Identities? Religious, Cultural, and Decolonial Assemblages")—all focus on educators and their perspectives on working with trans students and/or addressing trans affirmative education in schools. Each article brings a distinctive theoretical framework and context specificity that informs significant empirical insights into the tensions and institutional barriers that contribute to deepening our understanding of trans marginalization. Payne and Smith draw on Ahmed’s (2004) work to tease apart the politics of discomfort in interactive exchanges between a district superintendent and a school counselor, which entailed discussions about creating and implementing a school plan for supporting a trans child’s gender transition in a rural school community. Martino et al. employ a trans studies–informed political framework in conjunction with Ahmed’s (2012) work on the performative enactment of diversity policies to generate empirical insights into educators’ understandings of trans-inclusive policies in the Ontario school system. Bhana provides “a decolonial trans conceptualization” of teachers’ misrecognition and erasure of trans-ness to reflect on productive potentialities in thinking through the terms of enacting gender justice in South African schools. In fact, in employing a trans decolonial analytic focus, it extends in very significant ways the existing research emerging from South Africa and makes a major contribution to the field internationally (Francis & Monakali, 2021).

The remaining articles all include a desubjugated focus on trans and nonbinary (TNB) youth and offer insights into their lived experiences of schooling. In “Transgender and Nonbinary Youths’ Experiences With Gender-Based and Race-Based School Harassment,” Zongrone et al. draw on data from a large-scale national study in the United States to examine the harassment experienced by TNB students of color in U.S. schools. They apply an intersectional lens and illuminate both the racism and transphobia that trans and nonbinary students of color experience. Their study
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offers important insights into the salience of intersectional understandings of transphobia and suggests that while Black and Latinx TNG students experience higher levels of identity-based harassment, racism rather than transphobia appears to be the driving force in accounting for this difference. These researchers also found that Native American TNB students reported the highest levels of gender-based harassment; this finding highlights the need for a deeper commitment to embracing decolonial, anti-racist, and critical trans political frameworks at all levels of trans-affirmative policy making and curriculum development in the school system, where further whole-school and cross-curricular attention to anti-oppressive education is needed. Equally significant is that this research draws attention to the need for trans desubjugated school spaces beyond GSAs that attend to what Owis (2022) refers to as enacting a queer and trans ethic of care. Owis specifically conceives of such spaces in pedagogical terms that entail constantly challenging “the embeddedness of white supremacy, colonialism [and cisheteronormativity] in K-12 classrooms”—more explicitly, such an ethic of care, Owis argues, involves “creating (1) authentic, fluid, mutually vulnerable relationships with students (2) explicitly anticolonial, antiracist moments in their teaching and interactions with students and (3) affirmation and recognition as moments of healing” (Owis, 2022, p. ii).

In the next article, “Trans/Gender Diverse Students’ Perceptions of Positive School Climate and Teacher Concern as Factors in School Belonging: Results From an Australian National Study,” Ullman presents a subcohort analysis from her Australian Free2Be . . . Yet? survey study. The article presents a desubjugated focus on trans and gender diverse (TGD) students’ perspectives on positive school climate and the role of the teacher in fostering school belonging (Ullman, 2021). This study is contextualized against a backdrop of moral panics in Australia under the recently defeated, long-serving conservative government’s transphobic and cissexist failure to support trans students in the education system (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2018; Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020). Ullman brings a trans-informed analytic focus on cisnormative micro-aggressions to her analysis in building on and applying similar studies conducted by GLSEN in the United States (Kosciw et al., 2018). As with previous research, the TGD students reported high levels of transphobia in their schools and lower levels of support, respect, and school belonging. In fact, their sense of both teachers’ concern for their well-being and school connectedness/belonging was significantly lower than that of cis queer students. The findings of this study further highlight that much work still needs to be done to create supportive spaces in schools for TGD students and that educators clearly have an important pedagogical role to play in enacting an ethic of trans care in their classrooms/schools. As Malatino (2020) noted, what is needed is a commitment to creating a “resilient care web [which] coheres through consistently foregrounding the realities of burnout and the gendered, raced, and classed dynamics that result in the differential distribution of care—for those receiving it and those giving it” (p. 2). But as the articles included in this special issue highlight, the provision of such care in schools and support for it are either absent or simply inadequate as a
result of a systemic failure in terms of both policy making and the provision of necessary resources.

What follows is Horton and Carlile’s article, “‘We Just Think of Her as One of the Girls’: Applying a Trans Inclusion Staged Model to the Experiences of Trans Children and Youth in UK Primary and Secondary Schools,” which develops a staged model of trans inclusion as a “conceptual framework” and “evaluation tool” for distinguishing between different approaches to trans inclusion in schools. It draws on research that focuses on the experiences of trans and nonbinary children in UK schools as a basis for identifying and differentiating between “trans oppressive, assimilationist, accommodative and emancipatory approaches to educational inclusion.” Such a model is useful in foregrounding the assumptions and limitations underscoring these various orientations to trans inclusion, thereby drawing attention to their consequences for ensuring the well-being of trans students and efficacy in addressing trans marginalization in schools. Once again, the contextual specificity of the study in the UK adds another layer and salience to the special edition; it provides further insights into the culture of limitation and trans policiescape in the UK as a backdrop to the study—especially in light of the recent ban on conversion therapy, which excludes trans people.

Adelman and colleagues’ article, “Gen Z GSAs: Trans-Affirming and Racially Inclusive Gender-Sexuality Alliances in Secondary Schools,” focuses on the GSA club experiences of racially diverse high school students to examine how they navigate these spaces for creating “a collective empowering identity.” Attention is given to how racially diverse, gender-expansive, and cis students “incorporate socially resistant gender and race identity work within their GSA school clubs.” It draws from qualitative data with 20 students in the United States who agreed to a follow-up interview after completing the GLSEN GSA survey online. What is significant about this study is its intersectional attention to race in foregrounding the experiences of racialized students whose subjugated perspectives have not been given sufficient attention or space for articulation in the existing body of work in the field. Moreover, the article brings both a critical sociological focus on identity deployment and a critical trans political lens in conjunction with employing Lugones’s (2010) socially resistant spaces to generate theoretically informed empirical insights into GSAs as sites of self-efficacy and advocacy. It illuminates the capacity of GSAs to offer racialized students opportunities for core identity work that attends to the educative need to address both cisgenderism and questions of racism.

This activist work is also the focus of Omercajic’s article, “‘Basement Boys’ in the All-Gender Bathroom.” This study investigates the experiences of three students in one school and their Gender Studies teacher, who were instrumental in establishing the school’s all-inclusive bathroom. This study highlights that despite the overall supportive queer and trans-inclusive culture at this performing arts school, as well as an explicit school board policy for ensuring bathroom access, there was not a sustained administrative commitment to addressing trans marginalization. As a result, the study illuminates how such a vacuum of policy enactment makes these gender-inclusive spaces amenable to being coopted, and indeed colonized, by a group of cis white
dominant male students. This case study draws attention to the need for a sustained commitment to embracing both a decolonial and critical trans political framework in addressing interlocking systems of oppression and how they interface to sustain both gender and racial hierarchies in the school system.

The final article, “Schools Often Fail to Expect Trans and Nonbinary Elementary Children,” by skelton, is a wonderfully written piece that reports on a participatory, arts-based research study with a trans scholar and their nonbinary 11-year-old child. Together they interviewed Gender Independent and Nonbinary, Trans (GIaNT) children whose perspectives and artwork form the basis of the empirical work that is shared in this article. The children’s insights into and desires for more gender-facilitative learning spaces are palpable in highlighting not only their acute awareness of the limitations imposed by the cisnormative and heteronormative forces at play in their elementary schools, but also their generative insights into what is indeed possible in imagining gender-affirming learning spaces beyond these limits, in all their material potentiality. It is one of the most significant contributions to the field, both methodologically, in terms of supporting the agency and self-determination of GInaNT children as participants in the conduct of research, and empirically, in centring their insights vis-à-vis generating knowledge and advice about what is needed to create more equitable and gender- and queer-affirming spaces in schools.

The following commentaries are also powerful in provoking questions related to gender expansiveness in teacher education and with respect to mandatory policies for supporting trans students and gender diversity in public sector education. Blaire and Deckman, for example, propose that gender-expansive teacher education needs to be conceived within a broader commitment to enacting anti-oppressive education that is grounded in an intersectional understanding of how gender identity intersects with other social categories such as race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and ability. They reflect on what it means to connect gender-expansive education to socially just teacher preparation by reflecting on their own experiences as teacher educators and in light of the existing literature in the field. Their exhortation to embrace this approach takes on a particular salience, given what they refer to as the current moment in the United States: legislative moves in many states to restrict educators from teaching about racism and addressing LGBTQ topics in the curriculum. Airton and Martin reflect on how particular and often unarticulated norms that govern professional conduct for teachers impact, in harmful and self-regulatory ways, trans and gender nonconforming teacher candidates, leading them to hide key aspects of themselves. They call for the need in teacher education to explicitly interrogate these unarticulated norms—norms demanding that teacher candidates be professional—as a necessary basis for enacting a commitment to diversifying the teaching profession that refuses gender binary thinking and its gatekeeping impact with respect to regulating one’s gender expression. Finally, Bartholomaeus and Riggs reflect on the implications and effects of the mandatory trans-affirmative policy that was instigated by the South Australian Education Department. They argue that while mandatory policies are important symbolically in
communicating official governmental support of trans students, it does not mean that these policies will be successfully enacted in schools, particularly in the absence of allocation of necessary resources for training opportunities and monitoring the implementation of policy.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the special issue consists of contributions that address important questions about the conditions in schools that continue to hamper support for trans students and gender-expansive education. However, the articles also explicate the productive potentialities for thinking through the terms of what it means to create gender-facilitative spaces of care and belonging for trans and gender-expansive students in schools that are cognizant of the need to consider how this work interfaces with a commitment to decolonial and anti-racism education. What is significant about this collection of articles is that it provides a range of theoretical and methodological approaches to generating deeper knowledge and understanding about trans inclusion and gender expansiveness in schools that attend to context specificity and particularity. Finally, the special issue also reflects both a commitment to trans desubjugation (Stryker, 2006) that centers the perspectives and experiences of racialized trans students, and an epistemological engagement with a trans studies lens in its capacity to generate “a theoretically informed empiricism that places the data research yields in constant conversation with theoretical arsenals of powerful concepts” (Anyon, 2009, p. 2). As such, it advances a continued critical educative focus on the cisnormative “structures and systems that determine individual [trans] lives” and impact the potentiality for trans self-determination as a necessary basis for “imagining a trans liberatory future” in the school system (Rodman & DasGupta, 2022).

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