

Gender normativity in teacher education: A Critical Participatory Action Research study with trans and gender nonconforming preservice teachers in Canada

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Methodology

This study was guided by the tenets of Critical Participatory Action Research (Fine & Torre, 2021), meaning participants were co-researchers guiding the direction and methods of the study.

The following forms of data were analyzed:

- Individual interviews (2 per participant)
- Meeting transcripts of 6 meetings
- Participant artwork (zines)

Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which involved iterative stages of coding and theme development.

While I completed preliminary coding myself, my co-researchers were able to provide insight into the developing analysis at each meeting and assisted with theme refinement.

Significance

This research helps us understand and challenge normativity, showing how it operates subtly in programs that espouse a commitment to inclusivity and social justice. This research also illustrates the richness and complexity of participatory approaches to research within teacher education.

Related literature

This study builds and contributes to research on the experiences of trans (Airton et al., 2024; Airton & Martin, 2023) and other underrepresented teacher candidates in Canadian teacher education programs (Gabhi, 2024; Marom, 2019; Sumara et al., 2008).

Trans and gender nonconforming people entering the teaching profession today are doing so at a time where their very presence in schools is politicized. Yet, little research has considered their experiences in and contributions to schools and teacher education.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to work with trans and gender nonconforming teacher candidates to explore how gender normativity manifests in teacher education programs for trans and gender nonconforming people and consider what trans perspectives might offer teacher education practice.

Research Questions

- How do participants conceptualize what it means to be trans or gender nonconforming in the context of teacher education?
- How did they make sense of their experiences of gender normativity in teacher education by participating in this research?
- What, if any, changes to teacher education do they imagine would better support their capacity to thrive in their programs?
- How do they imagine engaging with trans knowledge and experience might transform teacher education?
- What did they find meaningful about participating in a critical participatory action research study about gender normativity in teacher education?

Findings

Being a Trans or Gender Nonconforming Teacher Candidate

- Participants understood being trans or gender nonconforming in teacher education as meaning they were vulnerable to harm or discrimination, particularly in practicum schools
- Participants also felt called upon to do work to advocate for themselves or for trans students
- At the same time, participants understood their transness as an asset in the classroom

Experiences of Gender Normativity

- Gender normativity was experienced primarily as an unspoken expectation, with few experiencing explicit transphobia. It was made manifest through avoidance or negative discussion of transness and gender nonconformity (e.g. framing as unimportant, inappropriate or unexpected)

Imagining a Transformed Teacher Education

- This research showed that trans people can thrive in teacher education when there is: 1) deep engagement with trans topics, 2) space and representation, and 3) peer support and mentorship
- Teacher education can learn from trans people about: 1) the pedagogical value of teacher uniqueness and authenticity, 2) how normativity operates on embodiment and self-expression, and 3) critiquing and challenging carcerality, coloniality, and traditional classroom practices

Experiences of the Study

- Co-researchers described the study as useful because it gave them more context for understanding their experiences and allowed them to compare experiences with one another. The study also enabled some co-researchers to feel more confident expressing themselves or speaking up about gender normativity in their programs and in schools
- At the same time, there was an absence of disagreement and some notable silences that came to light toward the end of the study or in the final interviews

Scan this code to view our interactive, visual resource for mentor teachers supporting trans and gender nonconforming candidates on practicum



Action

Action, or knowledge mobilization, is a central component of CPAR. This group took action by co-designing and making publicly available a visual resource based on our research to guide mentor teachers supporting trans and gender nonconforming candidates on practicum. We also co-wrote a conference paper, shared a zine in an art exhibit at an academic conference, and are continuing to work together to prepare a co-authored journal article sharing some of our findings.

