



# Transgender and Gender Diverse Youths' Self Empowering Practices in Secondary Education (and Beyond)


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<sup>1</sup> In the interest of providing credit where it is due, participants were allowed to choose to include their real names in the acknowledgements. Those who did were included here using the names they specified when providing their consent.

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## **Transgender and Gender Diverse Youths' Self Empowering Practices in Secondary Education (and Beyond)**

### **Abstract**

A small but growing body of literature looks to what transgender and gender diverse (TGD)<sup>2</sup> youth do to navigate oppressive school environments. This study seeks to contribute by asking what TGD youth do or attempt which contributes to their self-empowerment in secondary school settings with the aim of better understanding how they actively navigate oppressive environments. A focus group discussion and a one-on-one interview with five participants were analyzed through transgender studies, queer theory, and postcolonial lenses. Data was interpreted into three avenues of self-empowerment which these TGD participants engaged with in and after secondary school. Participants described practices contributing to 1) re-learning gender and their identities, 2) crafting their social environments, and 3) taking control over how they present themselves. These avenues contextualize the practices participants engage in by explaining how TGD youth navigate obstacles raised by institutional failures and oppression, and outlining the benefits of their approaches. While there is no one way to navigate them, these avenues describe practices which contribute to participants' self-empowerment and, thus, help them to make it through their secondary educations and lives thereafter. These findings further explain the ways in which TGD youths actively influence the quality of their experiences and, thus, point to ways school staff can support those endeavours and cease to present obstacles to them. Additionally, while this study highlights several relevant paths forward in research, it particularly demonstrates the potential value in participatory action research which seeks to support TGD youths' efforts to create less oppressive secondary schools.

### **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

Transgender and gender diverse youth consistently navigate oppressive secondary school spaces (Hillier et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2016). Despite the active role they play in

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<sup>2</sup> List of acronyms used in this paper:

TGD: Transgender and Gender Diverse

GSA: Gay-Straight Alliances, or Gender/Sexuality Alliances

2SLGBTQ+: The Canadian abbreviation for the queer community. The individual acronyms mean:

Two-spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning.

DnD: Dungeons and Dragons, a table-top role-playing game.

that process, much of the research on TGD youth in schools focuses on the risks they face and the elements of their environments that affect their outcomes (Hillier et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2016; Ullman, 2017). While those factors are crucial to understand the contexts TGD youth inhabit, a growing body of literature is moving away from perspectives which position these youths as passive and/or victims. That move represents a shift towards looking at how TGD youth exercise agency, limited though it may be, throughout their secondary education (Hillier et al., 2020). It also represents the jumping off point for this project.

In this research, I endeavour to build on that literature to develop a nuanced understanding of the actions and decisions these youths' make which contribute to their self-empowerment within largely oppressive setting, and how those practices affect them. Specifically, I ask: In what ways do TGD youths contribute to, or seek to contribute to, their self-empowerment in secondary school settings? An understanding which could help to develop a more in-depth understanding of how TGD youth exercise their agency. As participants came from both Canada and the UK, 'secondary school' here refers to schooling taking place around the ages of 12 to 17. However, participants' openness and the loose structure of our discussions sometimes led to reflections on experiences beyond secondary school to higher education and wider social settings. Given the aims of the project, those experiences were connected back to a secondary school context where possible. In pursuing this question, I took on transgender study, queer theory, and postcolonial lenses to guide the design, implementation, and analysis of the project. Those perspectives formed an outlook on TGD youth as agents, on the pervasive gender norm as underlying everything we discussed, and on the importance of nuance and context in building an understanding of the diverse and vast TGD community (Bhabha, 1994; McCann & Monaghan, 2019; Stryker & Whittle, 2006).

Before beginning, I would like to note a particularity of the language used in this report. I made the choice to use the abbreviation 'TGD' over the umbrella terms 'trans' or 'transgender' partly because, in the literature review, terms like 'transgender,' 'non-binary,' etc. are used to refer to studies which specifically only looked at those

communities. ‘TGD’ thus serves as a general term referring to transgender, genderqueer and questioning people, while other terms are used to refer to specific communities that fall under ‘TGD.’ I also hope that in using an abbreviation rather than an umbrella term, the individual letters can serve as a reminder that these communities are not a monolith and that there are always nuances to consider (McCann & Monaghan, 2019; Stryker & Whittle, 2006).

## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

To understand where this project stands in relation to the literature, the progressive shift in outlook on TGD youth from experiencers of oppression to agents<sup>3</sup> in oppressive spaces must first be understood. This review seeks to frame the research on TGD youth within that shift in approach from passive to active. Each section details the contributions and blind spots of perspectives which become increasingly focused on the agency and voice of these youths. Though, it is important to note that some research resides in more of a gray area than these categories suggest. As such, a few studies will appear in multiple sections of the review as their findings reflect several perspectives and thus belong in multiple categories. Ultimately, the review culminates in the conclusion that there is a need for and a lack of research into the self-empowering practices of TGD youths throughout their secondary education.

### **2.1 Beginning With Risk**

Much of the literature on TGD youth targets the negative outcomes and experiences the community faces. While this approach is not used in this project, it does present an important facet of the bigger picture of TGD youths’ experiences. These studies outline the consequences of TGD-targeted discrimination and cis-heteronormativity<sup>4</sup> and, thus, highlight the importance and urgency of TGD research. Yet, while it is highly valuable in bringing the *symptoms* of the issue to light, this research does little to address causes and potential cures.

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<sup>3</sup> Agency, in the context of this study, refers to TGD youths’ ability to act, make sense of themselves and their surroundings, and make decisions (Hillier et al., 2020).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Cis-heteronormativity’ refers to the straight, cis-gender “norms that underpin society” (McCann & Monaghan, 2019, 11). In other words, the rigid assumptions about gender and sexual orientation that are consciously and unconsciously enforced.

Mental health, for instance, has been shown to be a major area of struggle for TGD youth. Studies have repeatedly shown high rates of “clinically significant” anxiety, depression, and PTSD in them (Chodzen et al., 2019; Parodi et al., 2022). For reference, Parodi et al.'s (2022) US study of TGD 14- to 17-year-olds found those rates to be at 69.9%, 57.9% and 46.4% respectively, whereas average rates for similarly aged adolescents across the US lie at 17%, 6.1% and 19.3% (Astitene & Barkat, 2021; Burstein et al., 2014; *Major Depression*, 2022). With those mental illnesses come associated harmful behaviours. Various studies have found that TGD youth experience disproportionately high rates of self-harm, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Eisenberg et al., 2017; Parodi et al., 2022). Furthermore, the research has shown that protective factors against those illnesses such as family connectedness and student-teacher relationships are less available to TGD youth (Eisenberg et al., 2017).

Violence, too, is disproportionately targeted at TGD youth (Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Day et al., 2018; Eisenberg et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2016; Wyss, 2004). Young TGD people consistently report patterns of verbal, physical and sexual violence against them (Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2016; Wyss, 2004). Research consistently demonstrates that “transgender youth often encounter hostile school experiences” in which they “are more likely to experience victimization and harassment [...] than their non-transgender peers” (Day et al., 2018, 1738).

While these facts are important to know and understand, they scarcely explore the how, the why, or the solution. Certainly, they provide context and a sense of urgency, but there isn't much guidance on how to proceed from there. A risk-focused approach cannot delve into TGD youths' environments, what helps and hinders them, or how they engage with the world around them. Essentially, any other facet of TGD youths' lives falls outside of the scope of this perspective (Hillier et al., 2020).

## **2.2 Moving Past Victimization**

Researchers eventually began to note the limited scope of research which looks only to risk and suggested new approaches to the topic (Jones et al., 2016; Ullman, 2017). Out of those observations grew another subset of the literature which looks primarily to

TGD youths' environments. These studies add another facet to the understanding of TGD youths' experiences by building on the risk-centered studies discussed above. Generally, they actively seek to look past victimization, though continue to frame TGD youth as passive. Below, I outline three general areas of research under this perspective and what they contribute.

### ***2.2.1 Benefitting from Interpersonal Support***

A large part of this literature focuses on individual sources of support for TGD youths and their effects. Though they are less likely to have support on average, when family, peer, and school staff support is present it is highly beneficial (Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Evans & Rawlings, 2021; Jones et al., 2016; Ullman, 2017; Weinhardt et al., 2019). Family support, especially when expressed in concrete actions, has been associated with TGD youth being more likely to express their gender, experiencing less mental health issues, and reporting higher qualities of life (Davy & Cordoba, 2020; Weinhardt et al., 2019). Similarly, peer support has been linked to lower rates of bullying, less social exclusion, an increased quality of life, and feelings of connectedness, pride and meaning in life (Jones et al., 2016; Weinhardt et al., 2019).

School staff who actively seek ways to respect, accommodate, support and care for TGD students, who are knowledgeable, who can refer students to helpful resources, and who maintain TGD students' confidentiality were highly impactful (Evans & Rawlings, 2021; Weinhardt et al., 2019). Properly trained school councillors and psychologists can be particularly important in helping TGD students navigate the unique challenges they may face (Chodzen et al., 2019). Though often not perceived as supportive, teachers too can have a positive effect on student well-being, safety, quality of life, ability to concentrate, school belonging and connectedness, academic investment, as well as bullying and drop-out rates (Allen et al., 2018; Case & St-Amand, 2014; Davy & Cordoba, 2020; Jones et al., 2016; Ullman, 2017, 2022).

Altogether, these findings demonstrate that various people in TGD youths' home and school environments can contribute to positive outcomes for them. This section of the literature has already shown that an environment-focused approach contributes valuable

new understandings to the research on TGD youth. TGD people have little control over how the people in their surroundings react to their identities, but this research illuminates the profound impact positive reactions can have on their well-being and school life.

### ***2.2.2 An Inventory of Social Resources***

Other studies have looked outside of interpersonal modes of support to the social resources at the disposal of TGD youth. A huge section of that literature looks to ‘Gay-Straight Alliances’ or ‘Gender Sexuality Alliances’ (GSA). These clubs provide safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ students to socialize and organize in their schools. GSAs offer opportunities for 2SLGBTQ+ students to engage with current issues their communities face, learn about queer history, “envision alternative worlds and feel part of a larger community outside school,” disrupt cis-heteronormativity in school, and, sometimes, engage in activism (Bain & Podmore, 2020, 1238). They can, thus, allow students to explore their identities and to take up space in the wider school environment (Adelman et al., 2022; Bain & Podmore, 2020).

While GSAs often yield benefits for schools’ wider 2SLGBTQ+ communities, TGD students do not benefit to the same extent. Several theories exist as to why that is: GSAs are overly focused on sexual orientation so gender diversity is neglected, students with intersecting minority identities are underrepresented, or TGD students experience the same amount of benefit but face greater risk overall (Adelman et al., 2022; Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Day et al., 2018; Parodi et al., 2022). Regardless of exactly why, GSAs which actively seek to include discussions and collaborations with TGD students provide more benefits to their TGD members (Adelman et al., 2022; Chong et al., 2019). For GSAs to adequately benefit TGD students, they must, thus, be implemented thoughtfully and run inclusively.

GSAs are not TGD youths’ only social resources. Though they are less likely to participate in extra-curriculars and sports, creating spaces which TGD youth can engage in within the school community could contribute to building protective factors like school belonging and student-teacher relationships as it encourages further engagement in school life (Allen et al., 2018; Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Eisenberg et al., 2017; Korpershoek

et al., 2020; Parodi et al., 2022). Of course, these students also turn to spaces outside of school. Many TGD students, today, use online spaces (Cipolletta et al., 2017; McInroy et al., 2019). 2SLGBTQ+ students generally reported “feeling significantly safer and more supported” in online queer communities (McInroy et al., 2019, 325). Additionally, because it is not a physical space, TGD youth can participate without risks of their physical appearance affecting perceptions of their gender (Cipolletta et al., 2017).

This research has, thus, produced findings which further show what kinds of environmental factors play into TGD youths’ positive outcomes. Much like the section above, the social resources here have further built up a more complete picture of TGD experiences in schools. The kinds of social resources which benefit them and why, are explored and, thus, can help to guide schools seeking to cultivate a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere for TGD students. Yet, note how here too there is very little consideration as to how TGD youths themselves engage with these resources. The focus falls on where they succeed and fail to contribute to positive outcomes for TGD youth.

### ***2.2.3 Where Policy Comes In***

Finally, researchers taking an environment-focused perspective also examine school policy and administration. For the most part, this research has condemned the reactive approach schools tend to take in accommodating their TGD students (Davy & Cordoba, 2020; Payne & Smith, 2022). Even when the best of intentions guide school staffs, they find themselves unprepared to create a welcoming environment and risk failing students through inaction (Airton & Martin, 2022; Payne & Smith, 2022). Students or their parents usually have to raise issues after the student has come out – few if any policies are proactively put in place (Davy & Cordoba, 2020). Establishing standards and policies *before* students come out and which remain in place after they leave the school could help to ensure that everyone is accommodated (Davy & Cordoba, 2020). Recommendations on what those policies should be exactly range from suicide prevention and anti-bullying initiatives to staff sensitivity training and a thorough, up-to-date sex education curriculum (Bloom et al., 2022; Chodzen et al., 2019; Goodrich & Barnard, 2019; Wyss, 2004).

Regardless of the specific policies, however, collaboration between all members of the school community must underly them (Evans & Rawlings, 2021).

Thus, school policy findings have not only shown how critical looking at context can be in identifying reasons that TGD youth face more risk, but that it can also help to identify possible solutions. In taking close looks at institutional practices that fail TGD students, researchers were able to begin to put together means of addressing those failures. Therein lies the value of expanding the scope beyond the negative outcomes TGD youth face. Not only has this research uncovered more of the big picture, it has also begun to acknowledge aspects of TGD youths' experiences which were invisible under the risk-focused approach. Yet, as the final approach below will show, there is still more to be seen when it comes to how TGD youth are interacted with and within their environments.

### **2.3 Agency in the Spotlight**

While an environment-focused approach does expand the understanding of TGD youths' experiences, it still frames those youths as passive. Whether it be people, groups, or policies, most of the studies above look to what affects TGD youth without exploring their actions and voices. They ask what is done to or for TGD youth, and not what TGD youth do themselves. Where is their agency? What influence do they have over their experiences? The next section of the literature explores those questions. This small but growing body of research centers TGD youths' agency and approaches their experiences with that understanding in mind.

Many of the researchers in this area use a concept called 'resilience' to guide their work and analyses. 'Resilience' is applied differently by different researchers, but has its roots in psychology and generally refers to an individual's ability to face adversity and overcome it to attain well-being and success – though success tends to be defined differently in different studies (Asakura, 2017; Hillier et al., 2020; Matsuno & Israel, 2018). A key element of this approach is that it inherently frames resilient individuals as actors navigating restrictive or challenging environments. As such, it looks past an environment-focused approach and provides another perspective when it comes to

educational research on TGD youth. Not all research presented here explicitly uses ‘resilience,’ but most does.

### ***2.3.1 First Looks Beyond Passivation***

Even within this scarcely explored agency-forward approach, there is a good deal of diversity. Some studies focus on characteristics which are associated with an ability to overcome challenges and maintain a level of well-being. These characteristics range from TGD youths’ attitudes to their skills (Matsuno & Israel, 2018; Singh, 2013). Simple traits like confidence in their self-efficacy, acceptance of every facet of their identity, and feelings of belonging have all been associated with resilience (Austin et al., 2020; Singh, 2013; Wagaman et al., 2019). Awareness has also been linked to resilience. An awareness of the existence of trans identities and having previously engaged with trans people were related to less fearfulness and more comfort when trans youth first come out (Testa et al., 2014). Furthermore, an awareness of one’s own identity as well as the fact that it will likely evolve over time were also associated with resiliency (Singh, 2013; Wagaman et al., 2019). Other abilities like being able to navigate self-definition, to apply mental health coping strategies to “trans-related challenges,” to accept new perspectives, and to engage in personal growth have all also been pointed to as fostering resilience (Singh, 2013; Singh et al., 2014, 213; Wagaman et al., 2019).

Personal characteristics may not be the first thing to come to mind when considering agency, but the framing of this research is key. This perspective is the first explored thus far which attributes positive outcomes for TGD youth to the individuals themselves. It is important to see the value and significance of all levels of agency regardless of their size and scope when it comes to TGD youth. As Hillier et al. (2020) points out, that agency is highly limited given the oppressive environments these youths inhabit, so any understanding of their agency must be situated in that context. Though these traits and abilities may not seem extravagant, these studies presupposed that TGD youth play a role in their own success and well-being. As such, these types of findings begin to illuminate a new facet of the topic.

### ***2.3.2 Explicit Agency and Survival***

Diving further into ‘resilience,’ reveals some more explicitly agentic practices TGD youth engage with – survival strategies. These findings explore what TGD youth do to survive and protect themselves in oppressive environments. Survival strategies represent many of the ways TGD youth can feasibly exercise agency given the constraints in their environments. In this context, constraints arise both in relation to prejudices regarding these youth’s identities as well as their young age (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018; Hillier et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2014). Constraints which render TGD students “invisible [within educational institutions] and makes little room for gender diversity” (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018, 339). The wide range of strategies employed by TGD youth may, thus, not always appear to be major acts of rebellion or resistance. Upon deeper reflection, however, these acts can be understood as indispensable means of mitigating the risks TGD youth face.

Many students, for example, described engaging in some form of selective concealment. That is to say, they chose when to avoid dangerous situations or to hide their feelings (Hillier et al., 2020). TGD youth also carefully navigate their identity disclosure to ensure their well-being; they choose when to disclose or express their identities by maintaining a keen awareness of the context at hand (Asakura, 2017; Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Hillier et al., 2020). They carefully decide when to “[adjust] their clothing, name, and pronouns” depending on their “physical, social, psychological, and financial safety” in any given situation (Asakura, 2017, 527; Hillier et al., 2020, 392). Other strategies are more internal, like cognitive restructuring (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). This strategy involves reframing negative experiences to mitigate their impact (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). A young TGD person might, for example, separate the identity they are expressing from their “true self” (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). In doing so, they preserve their sense of self when forced to conceal or misrepresent their identities (Bower-Brown et al., 2023).

Survival strategies are, thus, key for many TGD youth in preserving their well-being and minimizing harm to themselves. These practices do not necessarily help them thrive and succeed directly, but they do help them to make it through their days. These findings provide glimpses into the dynamics of how TGD youth navigate oppressive spaces

and overcome the challenges, threats, and obstacles they are presented with. However, in revealing the extent to which these youths are aware of and actively navigate these environments, these survival strategies raise questions about what they might be doing which directly contributes to positive experiences and successes. The final section of this approach, explored below, addresses just that.

### ***2.3.3 Using Proactive Agency***

Resilience researchers have looked past survival to what I've called 'proactive agency' here. Similar to Singh et al.'s (2014) definition of the term, 'proactive agency' refers to decisions and actions taken by individuals in the interest of directly contributing to their success and/or well-being. So, beyond surviving, how do these youths find joy, express themselves, achieve goals, etc? This section of the literature looks at instances of TGD youth engaging in activities not just to survive and cope, but to counteract their invisibility and oppression. Means through which they can improve their school lives and others'. These proactive acts are the ones which have guided the design and outlook of this project. 'Proactive' findings tend to reflect four types of acts: personal, social, creative, and activist acts. Each of these categories has been explored below to establish what is already understood about TGD youths' proactive endeavours, and thus outline what is being built upon in this study.

#### **2.3.3.1 Personal Acts.**

In the often highly constraining lives of TGD youth, any decision they can make affirms the agency they have (Asakura, 2017; Shelton et al., 2018). Being able to tend to their own needs and make their own decisions facilitates their "efforts to navigate their way to well-being" (Asakura, 2017, 528). TGD youth have discussed making those decision through self-definition – a process that has the potential to be positive, affirm agency, boost self-confidence, and reinforce resilience (Asakura, 2017; Matsuno & Israel, 2018; Shelton et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2014). To be clear, this is not necessarily limited to these youth's gender identity, but all the facets of identity which impact them (Shelton et al., 2018; Singh, 2013). It is important to note, however, that personal does not mean alone. When it comes to resilience, self-definition is most effective when it occurs collaboratively with supporters

and peers (Singh et al., 2014). Fittingly, Wagaman et al. (2019) point to being a source of support for other TGD youth as beneficial as well. Whether as “a leader, role model, or friend,” being supportive seems to be as helpful as being supported (Wagaman et al., 2019, 56).

Another way TGD students exercise their agency is through exploring their gender expression – often called social transitioning. In making personal decisions about names, pronouns, clothing, make-up, hair styles, etc., TGD youth help to “queer their [educational] institutions” (Hillier et al., 2020, 395). Socially transitioning affirms TGD youths identities, disrupts cis-heteronormativity, and potentially acts as a catalyst for reflection and change among their peers (Hillier et al., 2020; Matsuno & Israel, 2018; McBride & Neary, 2021).

Notably, these acts further contextualize some of the findings discussed previously. For example, this understanding of the process of self-definition further informs the finding that an ability to navigate self-definition is associated with resilience (Singh, 2013; Singh et al., 2014). It provides more context as to how that ability manifests and when it is most effective. In introducing those details, the ‘proactive’ approach has contributed to a more in-depth understanding of TGD experiences.

### **2.3.3.2 Creative Acts.**

Acts of creative expression have also been shown to be beneficial for TGD youths. Researchers have identified a number of creative acts which enable expression, self-exploration, and critique of their socio-cultural environments (Nichols, 2013; Raun, 2015; Rooke, 2010). Nichols' (2013) ethnography of musician Rie Daisies, for example, demonstrated how music was a consistent and stable emotional outlet, form of self-expression, and safe space for Daisies. A much needed constant in an otherwise turbulent and unjust schooling career (Nichols, 2013).

Rooke's (2010) ‘Sci:identity’ project further revealed the benefits of creative endeavours to TGD youth. The project aimed to provide “a creative space where young people could explore their self-understandings of their sexed and gendered selves and interrogate some of the cultural incitement to gender intelligibility that they were

encountering in their daily lives” (Rooke, 2010, 659). In the end, participants utilised various mediums to express “the humanity of trans lives,” critique scientific authority and medical conceptions of gender, and respond to the world around them (Rooke, 2010, 659).

Interestingly, the internet provides some TGD youths with a similar setting to the one created in ‘Sci:identity.’ Raun (2015) described how transgender vloggers use the medium to re-invent themselves as they transition, document their experiences, educate others, and to shape public narratives about trans identities. Taking control of their image, expression, and stories allows them to navigate their transition and self-definition in a way that may otherwise not be possible (Raun, 2015). Along with the rest of the research on art in TGD experiences, this shows just how significant the role of creative expression is for these youths in expressing, exploring, and creating based on their interests, needs, and desires.

### **2.3.3.3 Social Acts.**

As was hinted at when it comes to acts of self-definition, exercising agency is something which benefits from community. How these youths engage with their social lives is, expectedly, an important part of their secondary school experiences. For example, seeking out queer communities is a recurring theme across the literature (Asakura, 2017; Austin et al., 2020; Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Hillier et al., 2020; McBride & Neary, 2021; Nichols, 2013; Singh, 2013; Wagaman et al., 2019). Some studies even touch on how TGD youth create queer spaces (Nichols, 2013). TGD youth use these networks as a source of care, support, empathy, healing, friendship, stability, and advocacy (Asakura, 2017; Hillier et al., 2020; Nichols, 2013; Singh, 2013). Whether on- or offline, they provide a safe, non-judgemental place to engage in self-definition, to support each other, to build relationships, and to, ultimately, help each other through the turbulent environments they too frequently inhabit (Asakura, 2017; Austin et al., 2020; Cipolletta et al., 2017; Singh, 2013).

What’s made clear by the findings in this area are that community spaces aren’t passively experienced by these youths, they are sought out and created in order to support each other. Not only does this further contextualize the findings about the inadequacies of GSAs for TGD youth, it also raises questions about their social lives outside of them.

#### **2.3.3.4 Act-ivism.**

Lastly, activism plays a significant role in many TGD youths' lives. Not only did 91% of TGD participants in Jones et al.'s (2016) study engage in some form of activism, 60% reported that they felt better about their identity afterwards. They also found that engaging in activism was considered fun, and associated with increased feelings of community belonging, increased resilience and improved mental health (Jones et al., 2016). Austin et al.'s (2020) study provided some context to those findings in their discussion of how TGD youth have a strong desire to 'give back' to their community and that doing so "had profound effects on their own well-being" (40).

TGD youths engage in activism in a wide variety of ways. Some take it upon themselves to teach the school community about gender (Hillier et al., 2020; McBride & Neary, 2021). However, it is important to note that in Hillier et al.'s (2020) study TGD youth were often, understandably, frustrated that staff were not already up to date on these topics (Hillier et al., 2020). So, while education can be a positive form of activism for some, school communities' ignorance should not be celebrated or excused as an opportunity for these youths to educate their peers (Hillier et al., 2020; McBride & Neary, 2021). Outside of education, youths engaged in disrupting cis-heteronormative practices like gendered school uniforms, demanding accommodation, and participating in research (Hillier et al., 2020; McBride & Neary, 2021; Travers et al., 2022). Notably, while engaging in these acts may expose students to "micro-aggressions and harassment," perhaps due to the benefits they provide or to their tendency to increased access to health and legal services, participating in activism is not associated with increased psychological distress (Matsuno & Israel, 2018; McBride & Neary, 2021, 14). Activism, thus, further demonstrates how TGD youths exercise their agency to influence their environment and how doing so benefits them.

#### **2.4 Onward From Here**

As may have become apparent throughout the discussion of agentic-focused research, many studies look at characteristics, survival strategies, *and* proactive agency. This is because the concept of resilience is vast. While resilience research has contributed

significantly to the picture of TGD experiences, looking at resilience oftentimes means looking at *everything* that allows TGD youth to succeed despite their oppressive environments. I am seeking to narrow the scope and look specifically at better understanding the proactive decisions TGD people engage in to improve their experiences and environments. The research thus far has shown that they do act in oppressive spaces, but a more focused examination of those practices could provide an understanding of more of the proactive practices these youths engage in, as well as the reasons for, approaches to, and effects of those acts. The aims of this project are thus an extension of the trend in the literature which seeks to look more closely at TGD youths' agency.

In zooming in to those proactive experiences, I step out of the 'resiliency' approach while keeping agency center stage. Whereas resiliency looks to what allows marginalized people to overcome challenges and find success, I focus specifically on acts and decisions which created positive experiences, outcomes, and environments for TGD youth. Yet, how exactly to frame and understand those experiences must still be determined. 'Resilience's' entanglement with the concept of 'success' is misaligned with this project given that the aim is less concerned with the highly relative and variable concept of success and more with positive agentive experiences within oppressive settings. As such, I've chosen to turn to 'self-empowerment' to frame these proactive acts – a term I will now define, problematize, and position in this work.

#### ***2.4.1 Understanding Empowerment***

'Self-empowerment' provides a means to define and understand acts of 'proactive agency.' Yet, to understand the concept of self-empowerment put forward here, it is crucial to first understand the conceptions of power and empowerment which underly it. Using, in large part, feminist conceptions of power, four 'types' of power have been distinguished: power-over, power-to, power-with, and power-within (Pansardi & Bindi, 2021; Thompson, 2007). Power-over refers to one's ability to influence or restrict others' actions, power-to refers to one's ability to exercise agency and achieve aims, and power-with refers to the ability of a group to collectively achieve a shared goal (Pansardi & Bindi, 2021; Thompson, 2007). Finally, power-within refers to the internal "strength and resilience" one can draw

upon in the pursuit of a goal (Thompson, 2007, 17). This type of power allows people to hold their stance in the face of adversity or to take necessary risks (Thompson, 2007). Importantly, none of these forms of power are inherently evil or good (Pansardi & Bindi, 2021; Thompson, 2007). Pansardi and Bindi (2021), for instance, point out that power-over can be used to dominate or to mother. No type of power can be *prima facie* linked to any particular moral status. Power is a tool which can be used in any way by anyone with access to it.

‘Empowerment’ is the process of increasing access to some or all of the forms of power – a way to make the tool more accessible. To Thompson (2007), empowerment is “helping people gain greater control over their lives and circumstances” whether at the personal, social, or structural level (21). However, this definition is not without problems. At face value, this approach suggests that empowerment “requires someone to be pronounced powerless,” and then empowered or “helped to” empowerment likely “by those in power” (Hertel et al., 2021, 5). The less powerful are thus inherently subject to a power imbalance under the conditions of empowerment. They must rely on the good will and status of those in power should they hope for any power themselves.

Thompson’s (2007) definition is not the only one subject to this underlying presumption. Approaches to empowerment tend to implicitly or explicitly, suggest that empowerment is imparted or allowed by those in power rather than due to the efforts of those seeking it out (Hage & Lorensen, 2005; Hertel et al., 2021; Hur, 2020; Oakley, 2001; Thompson, 2007). Thompson (2007) himself points to this prevalent mindset in following up his definition with words of caution: “individuals cannot be empowered by others but can be enabled to empower themselves” (Hepburn in Thompson, 2007, 21). Yet even this asterisk relies on language which suggest that those in power are central in ‘enabling’ empowerment for the oppressed.

As this project presupposes, based on the literature, that TGD youth can and do already act, ‘empowerment’ has a flaw which makes it incompatible with the study’s aims. TGD youth may be limited in their agency by oppressive settings and structures, but they exercise it regardless. As such, I sought a term which emphasizes that empowerment is not

“bestowed on others” (Hertel et al., 2021, 7). A conceptualization which maintains that any outside help towards empowerment comes as support or partnership rather than paternalism (Thompson, 2007). It is also meant to emphasize the significance of TGD youths’ actions and choices in affecting the environments they inhabit. While some empowerment theorists may consider the ‘self-’ redundant, the wider discourse around empowerment makes a distinguishing term seem necessary in seeking to explore how people empower themselves – with or without outside support.

#### ***2.4.2 Defining Self-Empowerment***

Self-empowerment, here, has been defined as the process or feeling of increasing control over one’s self, community, and/or environment. The use of ‘feeling’ has been included to emphasize the personal nature of empowerment while exposing that it is relative to a person’s own position and mindset. It makes the empowered person or community’s role central to the empowerment process. The definition also makes self-empowerment something which can be supported, but which ultimately stems from the self or one’s community. Those in power can intentionally move out of the way of self-empowerment or provide resources to support people in their self-empowerment, but they do not give permission for or enable empowerment. This definition emphasizes points key to the project and remains a rather simple, flexible definition. The latter aspect is important as what participants view as empowerment was not assumed before the interview process - their potential responses are rather open.

The definition is not problem-free, however. For one thing, to ask someone about their self-empowerment implies that they are in a less powerful position. It is arguable that they are still being pronounced powerless under this definition. In that way, the definition has not escaped one of the problems with ‘empowerment’ pointed out above. I did, however, attempt to leave room for that pronouncement to be refuted within the definition in emphasizing it as relative. Someone could, for example, already *feel* they have perfect control over their self, community, and environment.

In the end, ‘self-empowerment’ both describes a positive process and is built around the idea of agency. As such, it provides a framing to the project which puts TGD

perspectives and proactive practices to the forefront. Practices which represent an ability to engage in self-definition, expression, creativity, or any other endeavour which contributed to their feelings of control and capability. Whereas the literature on TGD youth showed how different perspectives have been narrowing down to this study's aim and question, the literature on empowerment has shown the reasoning behind their framing.

## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

### **3.1 My Personal and Theoretical Position**

Before discussing specifics about the project, I will begin by providing the standpoint from which I am writing. On a personal level, I am a straight mixed race cisgender man – though I am generally considered to be white passing. I am thus, not a member of the TGD or wider LGBTQ+ communities. Despite my efforts to be as well-informed as possible, there will always be blind spots in my understanding. While I take steps to mitigate those blind spots, as are described in the sections below, the time and resource constraints on this project limited those attempts.

On a theoretical level, transgender studies and queer theory predominantly guided the planning and analysis of the project. Both lenses are closely related and difficult to define. As the field of transgender studies was born out of queer theory, I'll begin with a description of the latter (Haefele-Thomas & Combs, 2019; Stryker, 2004; Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Queer theory, at its basis, challenges the rigid norms which guide our understandings of gender and sexual orientation (Butler, 1990; Jagose, 1996; McCann & Monaghan, 2019). It is, in large part, based in Butler's (1968) theory of gender as performative. That is to say that gender is spoken and acted into being – one cannot be a gender, they do gender (Butler, 1968). By no means does this imply that gender is a choice or performance, but that it is a social construct which is cemented by being acted out and repeated. A construct which is much more rigid than real experiences of gender. Queer theorists reject 'easy' classifications and generalized understandings (Jagose, 1996; McCann & Monaghan, 2019). The idea of labels, gender, a monolithic 'queer' community, and so on are antithetical to the outlook put forward by queer theory (McCann & Monaghan, 2019). Queer theorists seek to re-examine everything we think we know and

identify how hegemonic gender and sexuality norms do not reflect reality, but do affect it (Butler, 1990; McCann & Monaghan, 2019). It demands nuanced, complex understandings of social phenomena – particularly as they relate to sexual orientation (Jagose, 1996; McCann & Monaghan, 2019; Stryker, 2004).

Transgender studies were dubbed “queer theory’s evil twin” by Susan Stryker (2004). This is because it takes a very similar approach to queer theory - in fact they are based in the same feminist and post-structuralist ideas – but with an explicit focus on gender diversity (Haeefele-Thomas & Combs, 2019; Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Much of queer theory’s outlook is based in seeing gender as socially constructed – in the “figure of transgender” (McCann & Monaghan, 2019; Prosser, 1998, 21; Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Despite that basis, however, many trans scholars began to critique queer theory’s fixation on sexual orientation and neglect of other “modes of queer difference” (Prosser, 1998; Stryker & Whittle, 2006, 7). So, a new field began to emerge which “is concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist” (Stryker & Whittle, 2006, 3). This new lens is concerned with examining gender across academic fields to better understand the effects that cis-heteronormativity has. Transgender studies are just as concerned with nuance and complexity, but actively address gender diversity - which queer theory has historically ignored. My understanding of transgender studies is not as in-depth as that of queer theory, however, as I only found the literature on the former late in the research process. That is why I employ both transgender and queer lenses in the conception of this project. They are primarily reflected in my aim to put together a nuanced response to my research question rather than make any sweeping generalisations or pretend to have found clear answers through this project. I also base much of my interpretation on the idea of the hegemonic gender norm as flawed and pervasive. Therefore, much of the questioning process in this project stems from these lenses.

A postcolonial lens also guides my perspectives on TGD youth and oppressive spaces. Postcolonialism postulates that oppressed individuals are not passive experiencers of their environments (Bhabha, 1994; Young, 2020). They are, instead, agents with their

own knowledges who act within and influence the larger oppressive spaces they inhabit (Bhabha, 1994; Young, 2020). A postcolonial outlook is reflected in the basic premise of the project that TGD youth are agents in oppressive spaces whose outlooks should be heard and valued. Furthermore, it influenced my framing of agency in the literature on TGD youth as it has been presented in the literature review. Postcolonialism is also compatible with trans and queer lenses in guiding me to examine what TGD folks' interaction with oppressive spaces can teach us about how those spaces uphold normative structures and restrict TGD individuals' agency.

### **3.2 Recruitment and Participants**

Given queer theory's resistance to labels, I did not require anyone to declare their gender identity to participate. As I called for "transgender, genderqueer, or questioning" participants, anyone who volunteered was presumed to belong to the TGD community. In some research contexts, differentiating between gender identities is important to adequately address the study's aims (Bower-Brown et al., 2023). However, given the complexity of the labeling practice, the personal nature of identity, and this project's aim to explore a diverse range of self-empowering practices, that categorization has been set aside. Thus, the only requirement to participate was a minimum age of 18.

Recruitment efforts were subject to several adjustments throughout the research process. At first, I contacted several academic and community groups focused on TGD specific or LGBTQ+ issues in the Oxfordshire area. In theory, this would garner volunteers amongst the members and staff of these organizations. From there, snowball sampling could increase the diversity of voices in the conversation. Unfortunately, my initial effort did not yield many responses. In fact, only one person came to the project through those attempts. Due to the low response rate, I turned my attention to Oxford JCR and MCR Trans, LGBTQ+, or Diversity and Equity Officers in hopes that they could spread word about the project within their colleges. Despite many colleges confirming having circulated word about the project, no volunteers came forward.

With time becoming scarce, my recruitment strategy was re-evaluated in a supervisor meeting. It was suggested in that meeting that due to the very real danger TGD

individuals face outside of queer spaces, it may be too much of a risk for them to volunteer in a project with someone they have no ties or established trust with. In light of that idea, I turned my attention to Canada and my existing network there. Thanks to the efforts of my Canadian peers, I was able to gain an additional four volunteers in a very short amount of time. Despite my initial goal of 10-15 participants, I decided to stop at five total and move on to the next step in the project. This because I had already eaten considerably into time I had planned for analysis and I felt it was necessary to move on to the next step in the project.

Overall, I was happy with the diversity of voices I managed to reach. Participants' ages ranged from 23-64<sup>5</sup>, they came from a variety of backgrounds, experienced varied levels of support, and varied in their levels and approaches to community involvement. Furthermore, while I deliberately did not require anyone to label their gender identities, many chose to reveal those details in conversation. As such, I can confirm that the participants represented a diverse range of gender identities. Trans, non-binary, fluid, and other identities less conducive to labeling were all represented. All in all, there was a good level of diversity among the few participants. It may be pertinent to note, however, that four participants were studying at the university level. Given that this study is looking to secondary school experiences, that skew may represent a blind spot when it comes to TGD people who did not finish secondary school or who did not continue with school after secondary. People whose experiences may reflect a different secondary school experience.

### **3.3 Data Generation**

Data was generated through a focus group with four of the participants and an individual interview with one. Both were held online for logistic reasons. Each discussion followed a (loosely) semi-structured approach. Participants were prompted with a brief definition of self-empowerment and then allowed to take the conversation in the direction they saw fit. Four overarching themes guided the interview, however, which prompted some of my follow up questions and allowed us to pick up the conversation when it died down (Appendix A). Themes were determined by the "Proactive Agency" section of the

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<sup>5</sup> All but one participant were in their early-mid-twenties.

literature review. The “Clubs and Social Groups” theme collected both the personal and social acts sub-sections. The “Activism” and “Creativity” themes reflected the sub-sections of the same name. Finally, an “Online Activity” theme was added to investigate the internet use discussed in several sections throughout the literature review. I stepped back from control of the discussion to allow participants to direct the conversations towards what they felt was most relevant and important (May, 2011). Given that the aim was to understand what participants do which they consider significant, I thought it best to give them control of what we focused on. The more open nature of the discussions and the diversity of backgrounds present meant that participants sometimes discussed experiences outside of secondary school. In fact, one participant’s experiences with gender came entirely after secondary school as they weren’t out at that time. These contributions, however, were used to further inform those experience which did occur during secondary schooling.

Focus groups were initially chosen as the ideal setting for discussion as it would allow participants to build their understanding by contrasting perspectives and experiences (Barbour, 2018). The hope was that the dynamic introduced by focus groups could help to generate a more complex image of self-empowering engagements and school experiences. One which resulted from participants building on and challenging each other’s ideas. However, as group discussions eliminate a level of privacy from the conversation, an individual interview option was offered in case any participants weren’t comfortable in a group setting. In the end, no one opted for an interview due to discomfort, however, only convenience.

The four Canadian participants were able to participate in a focus group discussion of about an hour, excluding a 15-minute discussion preceding the interview to clarify the details of the project and obtain consent. All participants seemed engaged in the discussion and participated relatively evenly. The discussion was, at times, very segmented with each participant contributing, but not commenting on each other’s ideas. For much of the interview, however, the discussion fell away from that formal tone and participants engaged with each other’s thoughts. As the Canadians were first language French speakers, the group discussion was held in French. Due to that fact, the British participant took part

in a one-on-one interview. It was the same length and guided by the same themes. While this interview was overall more formal and less interactive than the focus group, it did provide more time to delve into the participant's personal experiences.

Both discussions were recorded and then transcribed in their entirety. I also took separate notes on paper to keep track of my immediate thoughts on the discussion. The French transcript was not translated. Any quotes appearing below were translated only when added into the report in an attempt to remain as close to participants' intended meanings as possible throughout my analysis (Saldaña, 2021).

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

Analysis was undertaken using the framework of thematic analysis as described by Nowell et al. (2017). They outline a six-step approach which is flexible enough to be molded to this project and provide a basic level of guidance for what was one of my first endeavours coding transcripts (Nowell et al., 2017). I did, however, begin to adapt the model to what worked best with the data at hand. The thematic analysis thus wound up being an altered process with less clearly defined steps.

I began the analysis by simply familiarizing myself with the data. As recommended by Nowell et al. (2017), I took the opportunity to read over my transcripts and confront my biases. This process allowed me to better navigate and understand the transcripts I had as a whole. As I read over them, I questioned the assumptions I made and their sources. This process was particularly helpful in trying to identify the ways gender norms pervade our understandings and actions. In reading over the transcript a few times, I was able to iron out my process of questioning the situations described and my interpretations of them.

I also took the opportunity to do some basic attribute coding. This coding method allowed me to identify other relevant aspects of participants' identities which came up in conversation (Saldaña, 2021). I included this approach in the first step of my analysis for two reasons. Firstly, I knew it would help me to remain actively engaged in the later moments of repeatedly reading the transcripts. Secondly, it helped me to be aware of what intersectional identities might be at play in our discussions. In the end, I didn't feel I'd

focused enough on intersectionality in our discussions to make meaningful arguments about it, but I found the process helpful to the coding process.

I then began coding using two approaches: In Vivo coding and Versus coding. In Vivo coding involved an intuitive, inductive process which made use of participants' actual words (Saldaña, 2021). This process allowed me to identify those elements of the text which seemed particularly impactful, were often repeated, or which stood out (Saldaña, 2021). This acted as a good jumping off point from which I could build categories and, eventually, themes. Versus coding was then used to identify areas of conflict pointed out by participants either explicitly or implicitly. This coding method involves seeking out examples of internal and external conflicts in the discussion (Saldaña, 2021). This approach was particularly useful in identifying areas of conflict between TGD youth/communities, the oppressive spaces they inhabited, and gender norms. In other words, it was very conducive to the lenses I employed. These two methods served to guide my reflections and keep the analysis aligned with the original research questions.

After the initial coding, I stepped back and re-evaluated the work I'd done so far to begin to create themes. I based this part of the process in Axial coding. I looked over the codes I had identified, reflected on their meanings, and examined the connections amongst them (Saldaña, 2021). Some of the ideas of Axial coding were particularly helpful here – especially given how it outlines a way to connect codes to bigger ideas (Saldaña, 2021). Though, as I progressively began to build up my ideas, I drifted further away from the more structured approach the code proposes and began building my themes based on the directions the data led me in. Through this process, the codes, categories, and themes were refined, redefined, and reconsidered. I was particularly focused on questioning my inferences, as well as how my categories and themes connected to my research question and aims. Once my themes were created, I questioned and reviewed them. I went back over themes, categories, and codes and began merging, separating, and setting clearer definitions of what I'd coded. In the end, 196 codes made up three themes. From there, I got into a final planning stage wherein I examined my themes in relation to my research

questions and decided how to present them in an actual thesis. This involved finalizing the definitions of my themes, reflecting on the deeper meanings, and building an outline.

### **3.5 Validity & Reliability**

I have attempted to show throughout this methodology that my methods stem from and were carefully chosen to address my research aim and question as accurately as possible (Cohen et al., 2017). In each section, the reasons behind the decisions I made as well as the literature which backs them up are outlined. Though, to be clear, when it comes to reliability, dependability and trustworthiness better describe the approach I took here given the subjective nature of the perspectives guiding this study (Cohen et al., 2017). Furthermore, in making my decision-making process clear I have attempted to transparently show the reasoning behind my decisions and to make those choices openly available to thorough critique (Cohen et al., 2017; Nowell et al., 2017). As such, I have sought to demonstrate the validity and reliability of this project insofar as they can be established in a highly subjective work (Cohen et al., 2017; Nowell et al., 2017).

I have not, however, discussed one of the major methods to ensure validity and reliability used in this project yet. As I developed my project I became increasingly attracted to a participatory approach to research, but unfortunately came to that idea too late in the process to meaningfully implement it. I did, however, have enough time for participants to hear my interpretations and provide feedback on what I made of our discussions in member checking sessions (Nowell et al., 2017). As such, all participants were invited back for a member checking discussion. Three out of five participants attended the follow-up session and discussed my analysis. Our two sessions lasted approximately an hour each. The first was a group discussion between two participants, the second was a one-on-one interview. These sessions were recorded, but not transcribed. I took notes during the discussion and listened to the recordings afterwards to ensure I didn't miss any of the points made. During the sessions, I presented participants with my analysis and asked for their thoughts on whether anything seemed inaccurate, I had left anything out they felt was important, or they had any concerns (Appendix B). I also asked about a few concerns I had regarding the wording and portrayal of their experiences. I did this to

minimize the risk that the report could be taken out of context or weaponized against the TGD community. In the end, I took the feedback they gave and adjusted my analysis accordingly. There were no major changes, but some nuances were introduced which were added into the findings.

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations guided much of the decision-making process throughout this project. CUREC approval was received to ensure that those decisions properly aligned with ethical research requirements (Appendix C). Some of those decisions have already been mentioned. The choice to not require gender identity disclosure, for example, which was made to ensure the well-being of participants who might find that process distressful (Jagose, 1996). Otherwise, participants were given multiple opportunities to ask questions about the study, their involvement, and their data so that informed consent could be obtained (BERA, 2018). Participants were also reminded of their ability to withdraw their consent throughout the research process. Furthermore, in recognition of their contributions to this study and their right to have it recognized, participants were offered the option to be identified in the report (BERA, 2018). As such, though participant chose pseudonyms for the findings section, some participant names are included in the acknowledgments.

One of the most significant considerations came with recruitment, however. Part of my beliefs as a researcher stem from a ‘Youth Lens.’ This lens asserts that adults often allow stereotypes and assumptions about young people to lead them to, wrongfully, discount youth voices (Petroni et al., 2015). That perspective had initially encouraged me to seek out secondary students’ voices directly. However, that desire came into conflict with concepts of consent, privacy, and honesty.

I valued the idea of working directly with youth but knew that they may not be out at school or at home. This meant that I would have to accept a major skew in participants, likely only speaking to those with more support and more confidence in their identities. I considered obtaining special permission to work with participants aged 16+ without requiring parental or guardian consent. However, I knew that may require a level of deceit on their part towards their guardians which was ethically questionable on its own, but

which could also put them at risk if the truth were uncovered. In working with older participants, I would be able to hear about a wider range of secondary school experiences, avoid deception, and mitigate significant risks. So, I chose to step away from the youth lens for this project and work with legal adults only. In the end, that choice provided interesting new perspectives regardless.

#### **Chapter 4 - Findings**

Once prompted with a definition of self-empowerment, participants described a wide range of experiences which they associated with the concept. All five of them expressed engaging in numerous practices which contributed to bolstering their control over themselves and their environments – or at least their feelings of control. Most of those practices were used in or began in secondary school, but some came in much later. Any experiences outside of secondary school have been used, here, to further inform an understanding of the ones which did occur during that time.

Below I argue that in analysing our discussions, three avenues of self-empowerment came to light. That is to say that the contexts behind these youths' various personal, social, creative, and activist engagements began to come to light. These avenues can be understood as representing the deeper contexts behind why and how participants engage in the practices they described. Furthermore, they frame these practices as parts of the process of self-empowerment. Each avenue is wide, travelled by whatever means each participant saw fit, and littered with obstacles which they overcame in their own ways. They are not narrow paths that all TGD youth, or even participants, adhere to closely. They describe general trends observed in discussions which manifest in different ways, if at all.

The first avenue, "Re-Learning Gender" explores participants' experiences as means of learning gender beyond the prevalent stringent binary norms. Next, "Crafting Social Environments" describes how participants cater their social environments to their needs rather than passively suffer the failings of what is available to them. An approach which bolstered their ability to re-learn gender and to engage in accepting environments. Finally, "Making Themselves Seen" explores how participants use their agency to, as much as it is possible, influence how they are seen by others. Each of these avenues is based in

participant experiences, developed through ideas from the wider literature, and framed by an outlook on participants as agentic. Finally, how these avenues represent and lead to self-empowerment will be discussed holistically.

#### **4.1 Re-Learning Gender<sup>6</sup>**

To begin, participants frequently discussed engaging in activities which helped them to better understand gender, their feelings, and their experiences. These practices allowed them to learn about gender beyond the norms widely touted as truth by the world around them (Haeefele-Thomas & Combs, 2019; McCann & Monaghan, 2019). Norms that schools play no small part in enforcing (Wozolek, 2019). Where conventional means of learning have failed them, young TGD people find alternative routes to understanding the world beyond cis-heteronormativity.

In their descriptions, participants discussed what has been organized here as a process of finding, experimenting, and expressing gender diversity as a means of ‘re-learning’ gender. Though this process may come across as a chronological progression here, participants engaged in each part in different orders and to varying degrees. Overall, re-learning involves beginning to distinguish cis-heteronormativity from reality. Understanding how these participants engaged in re-learning often also exposed different perspectives on topics previously explored in the literature. The following three sections delve into those means of re-learning and position them in the literature.

##### ***4.1.1 Finding Gender Diversity***

Finding gender diversity or representations thereof in the real world was a recurring practice in both discussions. Exposure to people and ideas which help them to make sense of what gender can be and why their experiences felt so far apart from what the norm dictates was highly valuable to participants. Some, like Bel<sup>7</sup>, were quick to emphasize how seeking out professional support while in secondary school played an important role in understanding his own identity:

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<sup>6</sup> Any headers appearing in quotation marks are In-Vivo. Please note that In-Vivo codes and quotes may have been translated from French depending on which discussion they came from. Furthermore, filler words and repetitions have been excluded from quotes for clarity.

<sup>7</sup> All pseudonyms and pronouns were provided by participants.

[TGD identities were] a reality I now understood existed, but it still didn't feel like it was real in the world beyond me. And it was in talking to a councillor [who talked to me about how they'd previously worked with an androgynous client that I realized]: "this exists much closer to home than I thought in the end."

Bel described exploring his identity with the support of a councillor as helping him to see that TGD people really do exist beyond of media and digital spaces. Conceptually, he understood that people who identify outside of the gender norm exist, but in practice Bel hadn't really encountered any of them. Talking to someone helped him to see beyond normative boundaries more clearly and to make gender diversity feel closer to home. Seeking professional support also provided him with means of learning about his own identity, in allowing him to "distance [himself] from the idea of femininity [he'd] constructed for [himself]." Those sentiments not only back up the literature emphasizing the need for properly trained councillors in schools, but also emphasizes how that support contributes to building a clearer understanding of gender beyond the norm (Chodzen et al., 2019).

Another participant, Neha<sup>8</sup>, similarly described how engaging with experts helped her to explore her identity by "a lot of [...] just bouncing ideas around in counselling." When she first went into counselling, Neha had doubts about what exactly her identity was, admitting: "I didn't know if I was just a cross dresser, or, you know, is it deeper than that? I felt as though it was deeper than that." In the end, talking it through with an expert helped her come to understand what 'deeper' really meant to her.

What participants described here is consistent with trans and queer understandings of cis-heteronormativity (Haefele-Thomas & Combs, 2019; McCann & Monaghan, 2019; Stryker & Whittle, 2006). As that norm has been taught, implicitly and explicitly, as unquestionable truth participants had to find people equipped to help them confront and question it (Wozolek, 2019). In seeking out counselling, they were able to see the diverse ways gender can manifest, question their own gender identity and, subsequently, begin unlearning the norm and put words to the experiences and feelings which normative

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<sup>8</sup> For clarity, Neha participated in the only one-on-one interview. Her contributions are nonetheless discussed in dialogue with the other participants'.

structures fail to explain. While this backs up other findings about the importance of counselling, it also emphasizes why and how it was helpful from TGD perspectives (Chodzen et al., 2019). In this case, it contribute to re-learning.

Not every participant was able to engage with professionals, but discussions revealed that they did not lack alternative means of finding gender diversity. Participants, for instance, sought out role models and representation in a variety of ways. Some, like Alex, found hearing other community members' experiences to be key to feeling "comfortable trying things and navigating [their] gender." Engaging with other TGD community members, particularly ones with similar gender identities, helped them to move past "social barriers" and come to realizations like the one that they "like masculine terms, it makes [them] very happy." Similarly, Bel expressed having found a mentor who was further along in his gender journey than he was; someone who showed Bel what was possible. That "[his mentor] was happy and that he was able to do things [Bel] had always dreamed of doing" was "very empowering." For Bel, having that role model helped to see that everything might be okay and to feel that he wasn't alone. Being able to build relationships with other members of the TGD community thus helped Alex and Bel in ways similar to counselling. On top of that, it created a sense of belonging and hopefulness for Bel by showing him positive potential futures he could see himself in.

Noah expressed another unique approach to finding representation. He found it helpful to see other TGD folk "in the wild." People out in the real world or online living their lives and being themselves unapologetically. They described a recent encounter with a tattoo artist who was so "open with everything about themselves that [...] it still feels [so encouraging], like 'I can dream about this.'" So, like Bel's experience with his mentor, Noah finds 'in the wild' representation to create a sense of hopefulness for the future. It helps them to see that things can go well and people can be open about who they are.

Given the existing literature on TGD youth, it is no surprise that participants widely expressed seeking out other members of their communities (Asakura, 2017; Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Hillier et al., 2020; Singh, 2013). Learning and sharing with peers is widely seen as beneficial to TGD youth (Singh et al., 2014; Wagaman et al., 2019). For

participants, exploring gender with peers was beneficial in their process of moving past “social barriers” as Alex called them. Re-learning gender was largely a collaborative effort in that regard. It hinged on finding other people to help make *good quality* lives outside of the norm ‘real’ for participants. Noah, however, introduced an interesting way in which role models can be sought out. Their search for “in the wild” representation is a unique approach which I haven’t read about elsewhere. It points to the benefit of seeing other members of their community existing and living their lives as themselves from a distance – a casual validation. One which had benefits similar to the ones where peers were sought out more directly.

Noah’s perspective also led into conversations about other ways participants ‘found’ gender diversity in their everyday lives. Perhaps the most enthusiastic moments of the discussion stemmed from Zenel’s mention of fan fiction<sup>9</sup> as a source of representation and reflection. Fan fiction provided him with stories representing queer identities and relationships. As a result, he was able to realize he “identified so strongly with [the male characters] that [he began to take issue] with being relegated to the gender assigned to [him] at birth.” Having “lived those characters” to an extent his peers did not, pushed him to question why that was. Literature, thus, served as a catalyst for questioning the reality he had been presented his whole life.

Bel expressed a very similar sentiment towards his experiences with fanfiction. He even expanded his scope to queer manga, literature with genderless characters, and stories about transitions – whether queer or not. That approach was further supported by Noah and Alex who felt that it was a common experience for TGD youth to “navigate gender through inanimate or anthropomorphic characters” (Alex). There was a general sentiment that they were able to identify with and connect to characters which they felt represented non-normative conception of gender and/or their personal experiences. These stories helped them to better understand themselves and to question the normative discourses they’d been exposed to up until that point. Through fiction, they were able to find and connect with

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<sup>9</sup> Fan fiction is literature written by fans which expand upon, complete, or alter existing stories. It is widely available online and often incorporates queer narratives.

characters who represented their identities. Neha added a little complexity to the point, however. She too discussed using stories, particularly sci-fi, as a means of exploring gender, but she expressed the practice sometimes made gender diversity feel more distant – like it was only possible in these fictional worlds. Though for most it was helpful, literature alone wasn't enough to re-learn gender for all participants. While the discussion after this turned away from role models and representation, it left questions about the other unique ways TGD youth might seek out gender diversity.

Together, these practices demonstrate the myriad ways in which participants sought and found gender diversity despite its exclusion from their education and everyday lives. Participants showed how they grapple with the norms that underly and dictate so much in their environments. Talking, observing, and reading were discussed as allowing participants to recognize their identities reflected in the world around them. As a result, the validity of those norms began to crumble and participants began to peer through the cracks. Progressively, they began to see themselves achieving their goals, being happy, and engaging in self-definition. Finding diverse identities, up close or from a distance, allowed participants to overcome institutional failings and begin to re-learn gender as a nuanced, complex concept.

#### **4.1.2 “Playing With Gender”**

Several participants also went beyond finding gender diversity, to grappling with what it means to embody it. For many, that process was one of experimentation wherein they created opportunities to step outside of normative boundaries to come to better understandings of gender and their own identities. Playing with gender is, conceptually, closely connected to the concept of social transition – where TGD people decide to express their gender identity outwardly and, as such, affirm their identities and disrupt the norm (Hillier et al., 2020; Matsuno & Israel, 2018; McBride & Neary, 2021). Some of these endeavours, however, may not entirely fit the definition of social transition. Many describe using more ‘neutral’ spaces to build confidence and better understand themselves *before* choosing to socially transition.

For instance, activities like cosplaying<sup>10</sup> were pointed out as a way to play with gender by Alex and seconded by a few other participants. Alex described cosplaying as experimentation in costume. You could be any popular character from any medium – cosplayers even have a lot of leeway in how they represent that character. In the end, however, it wasn't really a costume for Alex as “now [they] wear it every day.” Engaging in cosplay provided some participants with a context deemed normatively ‘acceptable’ where they had more leeway to express a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth. While these may outwardly seem to be (or *be* in some cases) means of socially transitioning, they were described more as means of experimenting with one's own identity in a socially acceptable way and a way of exploring “a very different mindset” (Alex). Through cosplay, Alex was able to develop how they see the world and themselves. Whereas socially transitioning is a way to ‘live’ one's gender identity, playing with gender is a way to experiment and understand gender and one's identity in new ways. These two concepts may overlap but are different.

Games also provided contexts where quite literally *playing* with gender is not seen as transgressing the established gender norms. In *Dungeons and Dragons (DnD)*, for example, players take on a “persona” and get put in a “social circle [with] other people who then, for example, use your character's pronouns” (Alex). Noah, for instance, used *DnD* as an opportunity to “just try playing as a man and [seeing] how that goes.” Through playing, they were eventually able to determine that he/him pronouns feel “good for *DnD*, but they/them is really what hits for me” in real life. Alex pointed out that that experimentation can even occur in non-2SLGBTQ+ settings as it's simply part of the game. Zenzel brought up another relevant type of game – online video games. These “allow you to choose the character you want to play as” in a “very very temporary” setting. They represent a neutral and fluid space where players can be whoever they want for a time. Other participants expressed having a similar outlook on the choice video games provide. Overall, certain

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<sup>10</sup> Cosplaying is the act of dressing up in usually elaborate and homemade costumes representing popular characters from books, television, movies, or pop culture in general. Often done for conventions or events.

types of games create temporary, fluid, pressure free settings where participants could explore their identities and the identity they take on is, by default, accepted.

Furthermore, several participants described playing with gender, among other factors, to have culminated in a shift in attitude. It helped to make Alex “more comfortable with that idea of masculinity” they were grappling with. A type of comfort which paired with a stronger understanding of their identity to come to a “f\*\*\*-it moment” (Alex). A decision that, despite what other’s think or how those around them will react, they are going to be themselves. Every participant described that moment in some shape or form. One in which they began to shift beyond ‘playing’ to ‘expressing.’ So, not only did discussions of playing with gender reveal how experimentation contributed to participants learning more about their identities, it helped to bring them to a point where they felt more able and/or willing to be themselves.

Interestingly, though Neha didn’t describe playing with gender very much before coming out, she did express certain acts which contributed to a similar process of progressively building up the type of confidence others described:

I do have the ability to gain confidence because I’ve done things taking me way out of my comfort zone like learning to fly a plane when I’m afraid of flying. It doesn’t by itself give you confidence, but it gives you the ability to know you can overcome things that make you anxious and fearful.

Where more directly playing with gender felt too dangerous for Neha, acts like these helped her to come to a point where she could be herself. She may not have been playing with gender in the same way that the other participants were, but she was certainly seeking out what she needed to understand and express herself. An example that shows that, for some, building to that “f\*\*\*-it moment” doesn’t require them to explicitly play with gender. Different people learn through different experiences.

On the whole however, playing with gender allowed participants to learn about themselves without needing to come out or confront the norm head on. Engaging in experimentation in these contexts meant learning about gender and themselves without stepping out of the binary in the ‘real’ world. Whether it be cosplay events or imagined worlds in games, these settings relieve the pressure of cis-heteronormativity and thus

provide them with space to learn. As such, while the inherently disruptive nature of socially transitioning may have been present in part, playing with gender appears to have explicitly been done in ways that minimised disruption (Hillier et al., 2020; McBride & Neary, 2021). Playing with gender is, thus, more closely related to an explorative process of re-learning than one of disrupting. That is not to say that participants didn't otherwise disrupt or seek to disrupt cis-heteronormativity, but that these activities were described as ways of learning with minimal risk and scrutiny. Playing with gender may thus be seen as a practice which precedes, parallels, or underlies social transition – a way to understand before expressing.

#### ***4.1.3 Expressing Gender Through Art***

Along with finding and experimenting with gender diversity, expression was crucial to re-learning for participants. All but one described actively creating or engaging in art as a means of expression. Whether it was writing, acting, dancing, cosplay, make-up, fashion, or photography, art seemed prevalent among them. Even Noah, who expressed not being good at artistic creation, made a point to express how they feel drawn to exploring others' art. Whether it be the tattoos that “helped [them] with [their] body and accepting [themselves]” or seeking out music that “feels like [them],” art plays a significant role in their life. For all of them, art was more about re-learning their own identities rather than the larger concept of gender.

Those who do create art made it clear that it was, first and foremost, a way to express the parts of themselves they aren't sure how to. Bel explained that “you have this feeling of being full of colours and creativity that you don't know how to get out.” For him, dancing provides a means of “exteriorising all the masculinity and femininity within [him].” Improvisation, on the other hand, provides a setting where “no matter what [he] wants to express, [he] can express it through the character that suits [him] and the story.” Neha, specifically pointed out that her art “can be a source of angst.” Much like for Bel, that source of emotional expression is highly valuable to her. Though the immediate emotions may be negative, they reflect a wider ability to exteriorise emotions which Neha highly values and closely associates with moving further along in her journey with gender.

Zenzel seconded those sentiments in describing how he felt that art, like his writing, “is a very important part of the experience for us [TGD folk].”

All these descriptions uphold prior analyses of art and TGD youth. Art is commonly seen as a safe space, and means of self-expression, self-understanding and cultural interrogation (Nichols, 2013; Rooke, 2010). All practices which further contribute to participants’ experiences with re-learning gender. Noah’s perspective, however, does raise interesting questions about less artistic TGD youth and how they engage with art otherwise, if at all. It certainly seems art is still highly important to Noah; they simply don’t create it. Neha also described experiencing art, like listening to music and dancing, as important to her well-being. Thus, emphasizing the value of different ways TGD youth may be engaging with creativity as a way to express and understand their identities.

Overall, these practices of finding, experimenting with, and expressing gender diversity have all been discussed as contributing to a process of ‘re-learning’ gender. A process which participants associated with increasing their understanding and their ability to be themselves. As has been established throughout this section, many of the practices which make up this avenue have been touched on in existing literature. Their framing, however, has changed. Along this avenue, participants demonstrated the context behind their personal, creative, and social acts. The role of representation in the benefits of seeking out peer and professional support, the nuance between playing with gender and socially transitioning, and the importance of art in self-definition and self-understanding whether created or experienced all represent insights which build on the existing literature. Altogether, they further reflect the process of re-learning gender, the institutional and social obstacles which get in the way of it, and the benefits reaped from engaging in it.

#### **4.2 Crafting Social Environments**

While re-learning gender was a major point of discussion, participants also pointed to the significance of the spaces in which that learning occurred as highly relevant. It became clear early on that many participants felt that they were “invisibilized” as TGD folk in 2SLGBTQ+ spaces, and even as trans masculine or non-binary people in TGD spaces (Zenzel). The marginalization of TGD identities was expressed by several

participants across both discussions. This aligned with previous observations that TGD people, particularly ones with non-binary identities, are not adequately represented in 2SLGBTQ+ groups (Adelman et al., 2022; Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Day et al., 2018; Parodi et al., 2022). These discussions further introduce questions of inclusivity for trans masculine individuals – a rarely studied topic.

Yet, what was central to the conversation was not when participants experienced exclusion, but where and how they created inclusion. These discussions looked beyond GSAs and built on previous findings that touch on how TGD youth create and engage with social groups (Austin et al., 2020; Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Day et al., 2018; Nichols, 2013; Parodi et al., 2022). Here, the focus shifted to how participants craft safe, productive social spaces<sup>11</sup> which support their re-learning, well-being, and self-empowerment. This avenue explores how participants do that within the larger, oppressive spaces they inhabit. A process which occurred both offline and online, and, on a larger scale, through activism.

#### ***4.2.1 Choosing, Changing, and Creating Spaces***

‘Chosen family’ was repeatedly used by participants to refer to their close, personal group of friends. Bel describes his ‘chosen family’ as “a fantastic support system.” Alex builds on that point in describing them as a group of people with similar identities or “who leave space for [...] openness and inclusion.” A group who “were an enormous help in getting involved in the community and learning more about [themselves].” ‘Chosen families’ provide a safe haven to explore one’s own identity and to seek out support. Quite straightforwardly, people chosen to act as family where biological family support or understanding may be lacking. This terminology is the first hint at how TGD youth approach their social environment. When it comes to personal circles, they find people who will uplift and support them, then *choose* to make them family.

Whether or not the actual term ‘chosen family’ was used, all participants pointed to the importance of building a close, supportive social circle. Neha, for example, described the process of going from not really having any friends before coming out to building a

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Social space’ in this section refers to the collection of groups and settings which make up participants’ social environments.

close and wide circle of them. A group of “predominantly other women” with whom she can have “experiences as a woman with women [which has] certainly empowered [her].” Zenzel echoed a similar sentiment in describing “grouping up with people like [him] which can feel empowering.” So, by any name, creating a support structure for themselves was echoed as a powerful engagement for all participants. Groups which, in Alex’s words, help them to “feel heard, but also to hear the stories of others which, in a way, helps [them] to find [themselves] too.” Thus, when it comes to their personal circles, participants seem to create conditions which allow them to reap the benefits of peer support.

Support structures were not limited to personal circles, much of the discussion focused on engaging with groups and communities. Bel’s assessment of the importance of community reflects the significance many participants felt about seeking it out: “community is powerful and truly a profound source of resilience.” He, himself, described participating in a “group by and for young trans and queer people” while in secondary as a way to engage with the TGD and wider 2SLGBTQ+ community. Neha described engaging with several 2SLGBTQ+ groups in her day to day life. Most participants described seeking out queer spaces as an important part of their experiences. That isn’t much of a surprise given that participating in 2SLGBTQ+ groups and events has been identified as protective against risk and beneficial to TGD youths’ wellbeing (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Hillier et al., 2020).

What’s more interesting about these discussions, is the way they described selecting the spaces they engaged with. Most pointed to finding spaces which, at least in some capacity, put TGD identities to the forefront. In other words, many of these participants found it necessary to seek out spaces which made room for them. Neha further described how different groups fulfill different needs for her. Some groups she found focus on social events, others hold talks about topics and people of interest to the community. Some focus on TGD issues, others are more focused on the wider 2SLGBTQ+ community. She finds what she needs where she can. This, when paired with the aforementioned ‘invisibilization’ felt by participants, suggests that participants found ways to navigate the trend for

2SLGBTQ+ spaces to neglect TGD members (Adelman et al., 2022; Parodi et al., 2022). Where one group lacks, participants found another to fulfill that need.

They didn't stop at queer spaces, however. Participants also sought out, influenced, and created spaces which suited their needs that weren't inherently queer. In fact, Neha specifically pointed out that she didn't feel the same "depth of relationships" in trans-only spaces. She felt that seeking out "mixed groups" was much more conducive to the type of connections she wanted. In fact, she created a local branch of a women's fashion group where they could explore a common interest, but also where they could "have a lot of close [...] in depth conversations." She created a space that didn't have to be explicitly queer to provide her what she needed – it just had to be inclusive. Bel described a similar situation before he came out:

I was on an improv team with only boys. And, every time the coach showed up he'd say "Hi boys!" then look at me and go "oh, and girl." I'd always be like "no, no, no, boys! It's okay like, I'm one of the boys, you know. It's okay." And they made me feel included [...]. It was just like, I was there, I existed, and I fit in with the boys on the team. [...] Even though I didn't realize it at the time, it was empowering.

Whereas Neha created a group for herself, Bel influenced a team he was on to better suit his needs. These two experiences seen in tandem with the rest of this section support a view of participants choosing, influencing, and creating spaces to best suit their needs. It's clear that there is no 'one size fits all' space for TGD people but these participants were able to carefully craft their social spaces – both in and out of queer contexts. Furthermore, many of these spaces were found or created out of school. This outlook pushes beyond the focus on GSAs in the literature and suggests that it may neglect several other spaces TGD youth interact with for support, learning, and fun (Adelman et al., 2022; Bain & Podmore, 2020). GSAs may be failing youths in some context, but these participants have shown how, when they do, they turn to other sources of social engagement which better reflect their needs (Adelman et al., 2022; Parodi et al., 2022). Looking to where they turn when they are failed could be just as valuable as establishing why GSAs weren't enough in the first place.

Participants' descriptions also emphasize the importance of the findings that TGD youth participate less in extra-curriculars and sports (Aparicio-García et al., 2018). From improv to fashion, to a simple assertion that “exercise is something that supported me throughout a good part of my life,” it’s clear that exploring groups outside of queer contexts was very important to some of these participants (Bel). That TGD youth tend not to participate in school clubs thus suggests that school settings are failing these students in some way which leads them to seek what they need elsewhere (Aparicio-García et al., 2018). That they tend to participate less does not indicate a lack of need or desire (Aparicio-García et al., 2018).

#### ***4.2.2 Crafting Online Spaces***

Participants did not limit their social lives to the offline world. They all described using the internet in a diverse set of ways. For all of them though, the digital world reflected another facet of the social space they crafted for themselves. Some, like Zenzel, found a community online where he was “distanced from corporeality.” That concept of ‘bodyless’ neutrality has been pointed out in the literature before as an important aspect of digital spaces for TGD youth (Cipolletta et al., 2017). A concept which mirrors the benefits of the genderless stories participants described exploring through fanfiction and novels. Zenzel described how that neutrality applied to digital spaces in exploring his use of social media sites in secondary where “there were no photos and there were no ‘already taken’ usernames. You could put down whatever you wanted. For [him], that’s where [he] was able to start using masculine terms for the first time.” His engagement with digital spaces didn’t stop there either. Today, “some of [his] best friends come from other parts of the world.” Specifically, because these were “the people who accepted [him] first.”

Similarly, Neha got her start in queer communities online. Soon after coming out, the COVID-19 pandemic caused the first lockdowns and her community groups moved all their events online. While most have moved back to in-person since – she still engages with some through the digital world. One group she’s joined, for example, is based quite far away but she finds “presentations from local groups [they hold to be] really really useful.” So, she continues to engage with them through digital meetups. She also engages

in social media groups like a rather large fashion group wherein she posts pictures modeling clothes.

Others, however, find creating relationships to be more difficult in digital spaces. Alex described having some online friends, but there “always [being] that difference [in relationship] because of the distance. [They] just feel like [they’re] not fully invested.” A feeling that “there’s a wall – like the non-verbal is missing.” [They] also expressed a concern about a “double-edged sword because [...] the news and comments” online could be hateful. A sentiment echoed by Neha who’s had similar experiences. In those cases, the benefits of online spaces may fade away.

While those sentiments were echoed by some of the other participants, they all still expressed engaging with aspects of the digital world. Several participants sought out media which was beneficial to them. Noah described how helpful it was to “see people post their [journey]” online. [They] also seconded Bel’s sentiment that “[consuming] content from Youtube, that comes from creators from [the TGD] community [allows him to] feel validated, like [he] exists.” It also allows [him] to explore news without it “passing through a cis-heteronormative filter which, unfortunately, often leads to homophobic and transphobic content.” What Noah and Bel have described here aligns with McBride and Neary’s (2021) finding that digital spaces can enable collective learning and self-understanding amongst TGD youth. Bel has contextualized that by describing how, even though he may not interact with others very much online, he does use the internet to find information not filtered through a normative or bigoted lens.

Online crafting, thus, is very similar to the offline process. Participants actively seek out what they need, avoid what they don’t like, and engage in the way that best suits them. Nowhere online or offline, did participants describe passively accepting the inadequacies of their social environment. Wherever possible, they craft their social spaces to best serve them.

#### ***4.2.3 Social Influence Through Activism***

As discussed above, influencing their environment was a big part of the crafting process for participants. Some delved even further into influence through engaging in

activism. Whether intended or not, activism provided some participants with communities to engage with and tangible ways of affecting the world around them. I should note though that I failed to specify any definition of activism during our discussions. While I define activism as anything from signing a petition to marching in a protest, participants seem to have tied the term to direct community involvement through humanitarian organizations. As such, this part of the conversation was limited by the higher ‘threshold’ set for what activism means.

Nonetheless, Bel was particularly enthusiastic about his engagement in activism through community involvement. He described wanting “to be the person others had been for [him] -” a “feeling of wanting to give back.” On top of that, he also has an “impression that [he] has a little more expertise” than cis people, allowing him to empathise and draw on experience to help other members of his community. In the end, he aimed to try, “even at a small scale, to improve the safe spaces that exist which allow everyone to unwind and to engage in self-discovery in a mutually supportive, appreciative, and friendly environment.” Bel’s engagement with activism fits in well with the established literature. Participating in activism is generally seen as improving well-being and feelings of belonging, and to be rooted in a desire to give back (Austin et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2016). He also raised an interesting point about how his involvement might be more helpful than that of an ally with no direct experience grappling with their gender identity.

Activism was not limited to helping queer communities though. Alex, for example, described the “almost validating” experience of volunteering with children due to their unique “relationship with gender.” They often have an open outlook created by a less rigid idea of gender which proved to be affirming to Alex. Alex found working with them to be a positive, accepting experience. It’s important to note that not all participants had such good experiences with activism outside queer spaces, however.

Zenzel expressed the “sometimes draining” experience of working outside of queer communities:

You really have to find a good balance because, sometimes, I found that... At [organization name], for instance, I was constantly misgendered while there because, even though I was sharing my pronouns and I was helping out, there

wasn't quite that level of openness. [...] And, I believe that 99% of the time, it's not malicious, it's often ignorance. [But] sometimes it's more complex [than just helping].

While activism was important to Zenzel, he also needed to address his own needs and take stock of the detrimental effects it can have. This provides some nuance to the focus on the benefits of activism in TGD youth and raises the importance of context (Austin et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2016). Though, it is worth mentioning that, despite those negative experiences, Zenzel found it “rewarding in the end to realize that you've helped these people.” To be able to decide when and where to engage in activism is thus crucial to its positive effects for him.

Speaking more generally, however, activism is just a small part of the larger understanding of how participants craft their social spaces discussed above. Throughout this section, the various ways participants fulfilled their needs demonstrated the active role they play in crafting their own social environments. This avenue delves into a process which some of the literature has already touched on. As has been pointed out throughout this section, the practices participants engage in reflect how TGD youth are often failed in social spaces provided to them in school – particularly in GSAs and extracurriculars (Adelman et al., 2022; Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Parodi et al., 2022). Some studies, however, have looked at how TGD youth seek out queer spaces and even touch on how some youths create these spaces when they aren't available (Asakura, 2017; Cipolletta, 2017; Hillier et al., 2020; Nichols, 2013). This avenue delves more deeply into what that process looks like. Participants' practices go beyond seeking out and creating queer spaces to carefully selecting, influencing, and creating the spaces they need off- and online – whether explicitly queer or not. A process which takes place at a small scale in practices like building a chosen family and a larger scale in practices like activism. Thus, this avenue has built a more complex and nuanced image of how these youths engage with their social environments to meet their needs.

### **4.3 Making Themselves Seen**

Finally, references to the significance of visibility for these participants were weaved throughout both discussions. This avenue is based on the significance participants

connected to being seen, validated, and recognized. They described several ways they take control of how and when they are seen. While the degree of influence anyone has over how they are perceived by others is highly limited, many participants' decisions reflected the importance of what agency they do have in that regard. Firstly, participants described a process of reclaiming gender which disrupts other's normative views. Secondly, participants explained the value of choice in how and when to express their identity.

#### ***4.3.1 Gender "On Our Terms"***

Several participants described engaging in unrestrained gender expression as self-empowering. A process which allowed them to express themselves and to take control of the narratives revolving around gender – if even in a small way. Neha, for example, described going to a Pride event in “the most extravagant outfit that [she wore without caring] that people [were] gonna look and stare at [her] as [she] walk[ed] down to town.” She connected that decision to an increased openness associated with expressing her feminine identity after coming out. An openness she also connected to her modeling on an online fashion group. Bel similarly described enjoying wearing “flashy clothes and jewellery” as a form of creative expression. The significance of all these forms of expression comes in in Zenzel's analysis of the practice:

I've noticed that we [TGD people] perform masculinity and femininity the most in our gender expression. We're often the people to wear very flashy make-up or set ourselves apart through our clothing. In the end, it's a way for us to reappropriate femininity [and] masculinity on our terms.

Zenzel is, here, pointing to an unrestrained outward expression of identity as being connected to chipping away at normative ideas of gender. Under this line of thought, the deliberate decisions participants made regarding their expression were closely tied to illuminating their conceptualizations of gender on their terms. An idea which relates to drag – an exaggeration of gender expression through performance and attire (Haeefe-Thomas & Combs, 2019). The main difference between the two being that drag is performed for an audience, and participants described their examples as being for themselves and their expression (Haeefe-Thomas & Combs, 2019). To many, however, drag is about pointing out the ludicrous and restraining gender norms everyone is subject

to (Butler, 1990; Haefele-Thomas & Combs, 2019). What Zenzel is describing is a similar type of ‘performance’ which has those most oppressed by gender norms publicly call those constraints into question and redefine them. Though participants focused on what Bel called more “flashy” forms of self-expression, the concept connects closely to the idea of socially transitioning as a means of disruption and catalyst for reflection (Hillier et al., 2020; Matsuno & Israel, 2018; McBride & Neary, 2021).

#### ***4.3.2 “I Did That”***

Much of the focus in participant’s discussions of their expression was on their agency. They described the empowerment they felt in making certain decisions about how to present themselves to others. Some examples of this seem small at first glance but were described as significant to the participant. As Hillier et al. (2020) point out, the highly restricted environments TGD youth inhabit means that even small exercises of agency can be profound. Bel, for example, described introducing himself in ways progressively more aligned with his identity until: “the first time I introduced myself as a man it was like ‘oh my god, this really does fit.’” Over time, he was able to decide how to present himself to others until it felt like his identity and introductions were really aligned.

Similarly, Noah struggled on a journey with their hair. A family member “was very attached to the idea of [them] having hair that went down to [their] hips” which felt very restrictive. Furthermore, their school had strict normative policies which required students assigned female at birth to have their hair longer than a certain length. They tried what they could with the long hair, but they were very limited. When they finally made the decision to cut it, they felt a great deal of anxiety which eventually dissipated when they realized that “it didn’t change anything in [their] life apart from making [them] beyond happy.” While pointing out that decision as a moment of self-empowerment, they discussed how the experience made them feel more comfortable about making other decisions about their expression and identity: “well, if my hair was okay and everything’s okay, maybe a binder will be okay.”

Bel also pointed to an institutional restriction on control of his visibility which he noticed in high school. He described going into a new school after his transition and the

staff holding a meeting to say: “caution, trans student coming!” Their intentions were to inform the staff of the circumstances and brief them on what pronouns to use, etc. In the end, however, Bel described the meeting as “making things a little weird” for him. Having put the staff on high alert was detrimental to his experience. In higher education on the other hand, where no such meeting was held, things felt different:

It was really like, I’m coming in as [Bel], masculine pronouns and terminology. And the professors didn’t question anything. I mean, there were a few profs I spoke to because it was relevant to something we were discussing, but I felt much freer basically because people didn’t know.

Both Bel and Noah have described trying to navigate their ability to choose how to express their identity and having to navigate restrictions to their agency. In an education context, these restrictions come from the policies (or lack of policy) that govern how staff and admin treat gender diversity. Schools’ reactive approaches to TGD accommodation means that when issues arise they are unprepared and must scramble to try and support the student – assuming that they even want to provide support in the first place (Davy & Cordoba, 2020; Payne & Smith, 2022). Throughout it all, these participants had to confront obstacles to their agency and navigate them so that they could present themselves as they want to be seen despite the challenges they faced.

This final avenue thus reflects the value of allowing TGD youth to make decisions about how they express themselves, to whom, and on what terms. It builds upon previous research in its framing of expression as performance and decision making as means of taking control of how participants are seen. Furthermore, it builds off of known practices like socially transitioning to demonstrate how participants’ decisions can disrupt the norm and contribute to their well-being (Hillier et al., 2020; Matsuno & Israel, 2018; McBride & Neary, 2021). In navigating obstacles to their agency, participants have shown a strong ability to use their influence to make themselves seen (or not) on their terms and the importance of those practices to them.

#### **4.4 Contemplating Self-Empowerment**

Participants linked each of the three avenues described above to the idea of self-empowerment. Yet, there was little discussion as to exactly how and why that is. In the

interest of adequately addressing the research question and the significance of these avenues, this section will turn from the practices themselves to how they might be connected to self-empowerment based on participants' contributions. Below, how these avenues represent processes of self-empowerment will be discussed through conscientization and three of the types of power defined in the literature review.

#### ***4.4.1 Conscientization***

Many participants' practices were associated with the idea of learning. They contributed to a process of "trying to understand what was happening" in their lives (Bel). Particularly in the first and second avenues, participants went through processes of deconstructing norms and putting names to experiences. They did so both on a personal level in uncovering the complexity of their identities and on a societal level in seeing the myriad ways gender norms pervade the world around them. Frequently, that learning was enabled by "contact with members of the community" (Alex). An observation backed up by the literature which emphasizes the importance of collaboration in self-definition for TGD youth (Singh et al., 2014).

Through 're-learning' gender and crafting social environments conducive to that learning, participants were brought to moments of epiphany - like when Alex realized that "social barriers delayed [them] from being able to say 'OK, all these male characters – I like them, not just because of a sexual attraction, but more because of gender envy.'" Moments which catalyzed deeper learning for many. All participants described seeking out a better understanding of gender and themselves in some shape or form. In exercising their agency, they were able to understand and navigate the restraints imposed by the gender norm.

That learning is key to the process of empowerment according to Freire (1968) (Gutiérrez, 1995; Hertel, 2021; Thompson, 2007). He referred to it as conscientization (Freire, 1968). A process of coming to understand one's self and socio-political position (Freire, 1968; Thompson, 2007). In the feminist lens, coming to that 'critical consciousness' allows people to see their "position and move towards other possible positions" (Carr, 2003, 15). In other words, it is a key step in being empowered to social

change. Outside of theories of empowerment, research has linked raised critical consciousness in TGD youth to improved self-efficacy and, thus, an increased ability to act on TGD-related issues (Chong et al., 2019). Why participants associated all these acts with self-empowerment may thus be partly explained by the conscientization process. They found power in being able to better understand their world and themselves.

#### **4.4.2 Power-Which?**

All three avenues also reflected aspects of self-empowerment beyond conscientization. Several practices involved participants exercising or increasing their power-to, power-with, and power-within. I hesitate to raise any instances of power-over given the power disadvantage TGD youth operate under. As a marginalized group, oftentimes their influence stems from power-to appeal to others or stand up for themselves rather than having power-over the people and institutions contributing to their oppression (Thompson, 2007). Otherwise, though the pervasive norms consistently raise obstacles and shape their path, participants showed that they could consistently exercise their agency in navigating avenues of self-empowerment. Examples across avenues demonstrate how that navigation manifests in one of the three aforementioned types of power.

##### **4.4.2.1 Power-to.**

For one thing, participants often described engaging in power-to and processes of feeling increased power-to. They, for example, experimented with their gender which not only contributed to their conscientization, but represented decisions to circumvent normative expectations in the interest of self-discovery. Every decision to play a *DnD* game or participate in cosplay showed participants finding ways to make their desires possible. Frequently, they chose to engage with imagined or creative spaces to achieve those ends. All of these acts demonstrate participants' engagement with power-to – their ability to make decisions and achieve goals. Furthermore, their creative nature expands upon the role of creative endeavours previously observed for TGD youth (Nichols, 2013; Raun, 2015; Rooke, 2010). Whereas much of the literature focuses on the benefits of artistic expression, these experiences demonstrate different ways creativity and imagination might be put to use.

Participants' contributions also demonstrated the extent to which agency plays a role in how they crafted their social spaces. Generally, the literature focuses on the effects and inclusivity of certain spaces for TGD youth (Adelman et al., 2022; Aparicio-García et al., 2018; Chong et al., 2019). Other studies focus on the benefits TGD youth yield from engaging in these spaces (Asakura, 2017; Hillier et al., 2020; Singh, 2013). Benefits to self-definition, in finding support, etc. which are backed up by the findings in this report (Asakura, 2017; Hillier et al., 2020; Singh, 2013). However, participants also provided insight into how they craft social spaces in response to their needs. An endeavour which demonstrates how participants used power-to to achieve the benefits other studies have described – how they sought out and took what they needed. Sometimes even altering or creating environments to make them more inclusive. Participants didn't sit back in unfit spaces simply being subject to their inadequacies, they all developed means of seeking out their social needs and fulfilling them.

When it came to visibility, power-to was exercised through unapologetic expression. From decisions to finally cut their hair to wearing extravagant outfits and jewellery, these participants exercise their power-to express themselves despite the restriction of the norm – and indeed sometimes in a direct challenge to it (Thompson, 2007). All these decisions showed how participants went about expressing their identities, challenging others' assumptions, and being themselves. Experiences which not only act as examples of their power-to, but which helped to “push more and more” against expectations and to be themselves (Noah). In other words, these experiences also encouraged participants to further express who they are.

#### **4.4.2.2 Power-with.**

Power-with also came up frequently in discussion. All participants described seeking out community, peers, and role models in some way. Some found groups to learn about themselves and created ‘chosen families.’ In those cases, participants showed the significance of their role in finding support. An element which is often overlooked in literature. Many studies tout the benefits of those various forms of support, or the disadvantages associated with their scarcity but do not acknowledge youths' agency

(Adelman et al., 2022; Bain & Podmore, 2020; Weinhardt et al., 2019). Participants here showed that many of those benefits hold true for them, but they also showed their processes of curating their social space so that they are getting what they need. That navigation of the positives and negatives of different parts of their social life builds on the few studies which discuss the benefits of seeking out and creating queer communities off- and online (Bower-Brown et al., 2023; Hillier et al., 2020; McBride & Neary, 2021; Nichols, 2013). Beyond queer spaces, participants showed how they find, influence, and create all kinds of spaces where they can discuss and work toward aims.

Some participants, like Bel, engaged heavily with the TGD community and actively sought to improve “safe spaces [and allow members] to engage in self-discovery in a mutually supportive, appreciative, and friendly environment.” In those cases, participants’ experiences mirrored those described in the literature. Activism was largely beneficial to those participants and based in a desire to give back (Austin et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2016). Though one participant noted the importance of understanding the context in which volunteering occurs and remaining aware of how it might be affecting volunteers’ mental health. In all these examples, however, participants described collaborating with other members of their community in the interest of some aim. Acts which fit the textbook definition of power-with (Pansardi & Bindi, 2021). Certainly, those aims weren’t always social action, but they were important to participants nonetheless.

#### **4.4.2.3 Power-within.**

Finally, participants also described several experiences which contributed to their power-within. Sometimes, those feelings of validation and increased self-concept came from others (Thompson, 2007). Alex, for example, described feeling validated in volunteering with young people. Noah and Bel expressed feeling more capable of achieving their desired futures thanks to other members of the TGD community they encountered. In these cases, their engagements with others increased their feelings of self-empowerment.

Of course, many experiences also demonstrated participants’ ability to increase their own feelings of power-within. Playing with gender and building confidence, for

example, were a major topic of conversation. Participants felt that engaging in certain activities helped them to get to a place where they could prioritize their happiness over the constraints of the gender norm. Many of these activities helped participants to get to a point where they felt ready to socially transition and reap the benefits of doing so (Hillier et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2016; Matsuno & Israel, 2018; McBride & Neary, 2021). Participants' choices thus increased their 'power-within' and helped them to feel ready to explore and express their genders.

TGD youth engage heavily with self-empowerment on all fronts, and that there is much to learn from their endeavours doing so. They are constantly using their agency to navigate oppressive spaces – particularly schools. This section has shown that the practices collected in the avenues above reflect a drive towards self-empowerment amongst participants. They are constantly engaging in acts which involve exercising their power and increasing their access to power. Endeavours which, in turn, provide them with positive outcomes and benefits.

### **Chapter 5 - Conclusion**

At its basis, this study asked how TGD youth engage in processes of self-empowerment within oppressive secondary school spaces. Discussions with TGD individuals and previous TGD research were used to explore how, in exercising their agency, participants engage in processes of self-empowerment. In travelling along three avenues, participants demonstrated not only that they use their agency, but the ways, the reasons, and the effects of doing so. Along the first avenue, they re-learn gender by seeking out, experimenting with, and expressing gender diversity. These practices demonstrate how participants learned to break free of cis-heteronormativity. The second avenue involves the ways participants went beyond choosing and experiencing their social environment to deliberately crafting it. All of them engaged in a process of selecting, influencing, and creating elements of their social environments to better suit their needs and desires in the face of unwelcoming or non-inclusive settings. On the final avenue, participants demonstrated taking control of how and when they are seen. In the face of stringent

limitations to their power, they find ways to re-define gender on their terms and to decide when and how to have their identities recognized.

Each of these avenues represent the myriad of imaginative, effective ways participants engaged in self-empowerment. In understanding those practices, this study has further contextualized the range of proactive acts TGD youth engage in. Participants' use of fanfiction, cosplay, and so on reflect newly described practices which bolstered their self-empowerment. Additionally, the interpretation and exploration of those practices has framed them in a way that displays the needs participants were fulfilling, the obstacles they were navigating, and the benefits they were reaping. Those insights, in turn, expand upon the existing understanding of proactive acts in the literature. In other words, these avenues represent a deeper delve into TGD youths' experiences from the perspective of TGD participants themselves.

The vast diversity of approaches participants took also demonstrated the uniqueness of each of their needs and methods for having them fulfilled. Perhaps the only broad generalization that can be made from these discussions is that TGD people cannot be viewed as a monolithic community. I've pointed to trends from this discussion which I believe show patterns in how and what participants generally sought out. Yet, there were very few instances where everyone agreed about any one practice. Thus, the importance of acknowledging TGD youths' agency and providing opportunities for choice has come through as crucial to any school or staff seeking to support their self-empowerment.

### **5.1 Limitations**

There are a few limitations in this project to keep in mind as well. For one thing, I was only able to hear from five participants. This means that the diversity of voices was inherently limited. An issue which was further exacerbated by the lack of in-depth discussions about intersectionality among participants during our discussions. It should thus be assumed that a lot may have been missed due to the small sample size. Furthermore, as one participant was part of a one-on-one discussion, their contributions were not challenged and built upon by other participants in the same way that others' were. Not only does this mean that there was a difference in how data was generated across participants,

but it also means that it's possible that the interview yielded less rich data as it was generated in isolation. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, given my cis, straight identity, the lack of meaningful representation of TGD perspectives in the design and execution of the project represents a shortfall which opens the door to unchecked and unseen biases on my part.

### **Chapter 6- Implications**

In terms of practice, these findings have emphasized the need for accurate, nuanced gender education and representation. Providing students with the resources to explore their identities could support them in building a clearer picture of gender and themselves. This could come through resources like literature where moving beyond canonical and popular novels can allow classrooms to incorporate meaningful representation which pushes back against the ostracization and invalidation of TGD identities in the curriculum (Wozolek, 2019). Fan fiction, for example, was highly valuable for participants in seeking out inclusive narratives and is a widely available, free form of literature available to teachers. Representation cannot stop there however, staff should be encouraged to challenge themselves and deconstruct the underlying gender assumptions within them and their curricula. No subject is left untouched by gender norms, so all subjects should move beyond performative acts of minor inclusion.

Providing choice also stands out as crucial to school practices. Deciding on one course of action to accommodate TGD students might make things easy for staff, but as Bel's experience in secondary school showed, that course is not necessarily what's best for the student. Encouraging a system where TGD youth are consulted and can decide how to approach their accommodation is essential. School processes need to be questioned, rethought, and remade in collaboration with the students they are meant to help.

This project has also revealed potential new avenues for research. Discussions of the 'invisibilisations' of trans masculine identities in TGD spaces and discourse indicates a need to hear voices from that community. Certain specific practices these participants describe also present opportunities for further study. Their experiences with fan fiction, cosplay, and experiencing rather than creating art are all self-empowering acts which could

be better understood, and, in turn, better supported by schools. More research into TGD social lives beyond GSAs could also present interesting insights into how TGD youth interact with their social environments outside of those clubs. Additionally, institutional reviews of how cis-heteronormativity manifests in schools which hears TGD youths' perspectives could also be beneficial. Finally, as this project demonstrated the many ways TGD youth create self-empowerment it also points to the possibility of working with TGD youth in redesigning schools to accommodate them best. Action research in this area could be highly valuable in supporting TGD youth seeking to improve their school environments.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Semi-Structured Discussion Guide**

As I wanted participants to focus on topics which were most relevant to their experience, the topics below are general suggestions for discussion. The main goal of these topics was to provide a place to start if the conversation died out or if it strayed too far from the research question.

#### **First Thoughts**

- To begin, is there anything any of you did in secondary school that jumps to mind as having been a positive experience? What positive experiences do you remember from secondary school?

#### **Topic 1: Activism**

- Did any of you engage in activism in secondary school? This could be big things or small – and about any topic. Signing petitions, standing up for someone, attending a march, etc.

#### **Topic 2: Creativity**

- Did any of you participate in any creative activities? This could be any hobby or art you got involved with.

#### **Topic 3: Clubs/Social Groups**

- Were any of you involved in clubs or tight social groups? What kinds of things did you do?

#### **Topic 4: Online Activity**

- Did anyone find positive experiences online? Were there particular websites or pages you used? What did you do on those pages?

## **Appendix B**

### **Semi-Structured Discussion Guide**

As with the first guide, these topics were only meant to scaffold the conversation if the discussion died down or strayed. What is really sought are the participants' thoughts and feelings about how their contributions are being used.

#### **First Thoughts**

- What are your first impressions? Does anything about my interpretation stand out?

#### **Topic 1: Accuracy**

- Is there anything that seems inaccurate? Or, particularly accurate?

#### **Topic 2: Missing Interpretation**

- Do you feel like I missed anything from the discussion you were a part of?

#### **Topic 3: Concerns**

- Do you have any concerns about what I've said?

## Appendix C

### CUREC Approval

**SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES  
INTERDIVISIONAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE  
DEPARTMENTAL RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

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Jaeden Wilson [Jaeden.wilson@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:Jaeden.wilson@education.ox.ac.uk)  
Department of Education, Social Sciences Division  
University of Oxford

30 May 2023

Dear Jaeden,

#### Research ethics approval

**Research title: Self-Empowering Practices: How Transgender and Gender Diverse Youths Create Positive Experiences in Secondary School**

**Research ethics reference: EDUC-CIA-23-065; Amendment 1**

**Date of amendment: 24 May 2023**

The above amendment has been considered on behalf of the Department of Education Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) in accordance with the University's procedures for ethical approval of all research involving human participants.

I am pleased to confirm that, on the basis of the information provided to the DREC, ethics approval has now been granted for this amendment.

Please note the following:

**Personal data:** It is the responsibility of the PI to ensure that all personal data collected during the project is managed in accordance with the University's [guidance and legal requirements](#).

**In-person activities:** Any data collection involving in-person interactions with participants must have an up-to-date fieldwork risk assessment in place; further guidance is available from the Safety Office's [website](#).

**Amendments:** Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the information in your ethics application as submitted at date of this approval, as all changes must receive ethical approval prior to implementation. The amendment form is available on the [SSH IDREC webpage](#).

We welcome feedback on your experience of the ethical review process and suggestions for improvement. Please email any comments to [staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:staff.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) / [student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk](mailto:student.curec@education.ox.ac.uk) or [ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely

Dr Emma Rawlings Smith  
DREC member

