Catholic Policies and Parental Rights Legislation: Impacts on 2SLGBTQ+ and Allied Youth and Educators in Alberta's Publicly Funded Catholic Schools

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Abstract/Resumé

In December of 2024, Alberta's United Conservative Party government passed a series of legislative changes affecting gender identity and expression, including Bill 27, a portion of which mandates parental consent for pronouns and preferred names for individuals aged 15 and under, and parental notification for those aged sixteen and seventeen. In publicly funded Catholic schools, where religious doctrine already imposes limitations on the inclusion and visibility of diverse gender and sexual identities, such policies pose an additional layer of repression. Existing literature highlights how Catholic schools, through religious doctrine, institutional surveillance, and parental rights rhetoric institutionalize heteronormativity to the detriment of 2SLGBTQ+ youth and their allied educators. This thesis builds on previous research by exploring the intersection of religious doctrine and contemporary political shifts, influenced by right-wing populism and anti-gender movements. The effects of these intersecting elements on educators and students advocating for inclusive spaces within Catholic school settings is examined. Using institutional ethnography as a methodology, this study situates individual experiences within broader institutional processes to reveal how policies shape daily activities. Beginning in the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ and allied students and educators in Alberta's Catholic schools, this research focuses on barriers, advocacy, and resistance in relation to Catholic school board policies and the creation of Bill 27. Through interviews with ten educators and three recent graduates, this thesis highlights the complex web of institutional barriers that shape advocacy and resistance in Alberta's publicly funded Catholic schools. The study demonstrates how students and educators navigate these barriers to prioritize student well-being, thereby providing valuable insights for educators and policymakers wanting to support inclusive practices in schools.

En décembre 2024, le gouvernement du Parti conservateur unifié de l'Alberta a adopté une série de modifications législatives concernant l'identité et l'expression de genre, notamment le projet de loi 27, dont une partie rend obligatoire le consentement parental pour les pronoms et les noms préférés pour les personnes âgées de 15 ans et moins, et la notification parentale pour les personnes âgées de 16 et 17 ans. Dans les écoles catholiques financées par des fonds publics, où la doctrine religieuse impose déjà des limites à l'inclusion et à la visibilité des diverses identités sexuelles et de genre, ces politiques constituent une couche supplémentaire de répression. La littérature existante souligne comment les écoles catholiques, par le biais de la doctrine

religieuse, de la surveillance institutionnelle et de la rhétorique des droits parentaux, institutionnalisent l'hétéronormativité au détriment des jeunes 2SLGBTQ+ et de leurs éducateurs alliés. Cette thèse s'appuie sur les recherches précédentes en explorant l'intersection de la doctrine religieuse et des changements politiques contemporains, influencés par le populisme de droite et les mouvements anti-genre. Les effets de ces éléments croisés sur les éducateurs et les étudiants qui défendent des espaces inclusifs dans les écoles catholiques sont examinés.

En utilisant l'ethnographie institutionnelle comme méthodologie, cette étude situe les expériences individuelles dans des processus institutionnels plus larges afin de révéler comment les politiques façonnent les activités quotidiennes. En commençant par les expériences des étudiants et des éducateurs 2SLGBTQ+ et alliés dans les écoles catholiques de l'Alberta, cette recherche se concentre sur les obstacles, la défense et la résistance en relation avec les politiques des conseils scolaires catholiques et la création du projet de loi 27. Par le biais d'entrevues avec dix éducateurs et trois diplômés récents, cette thèse met en lumière le réseau complexe de barrières institutionnelles qui façonnent la défense des droits et la résistance dans les écoles catholiques financées par l'État en Alberta. L'étude montre comment les étudiants et les éducateurs surmontent ces obstacles afin de donner la priorité au bien-être des étudiants, fournissant ainsi des informations précieuses aux éducateurs et aux décideurs politiques qui souhaitent soutenir les pratiques inclusives dans les écoles.

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Finally, this project would never have happened if it weren't for my students. Over the years I have had the privilege to work with so many incredible young people. To the kids in GSA, Poetry Club, and my English classes who shared their vulnerability: thank you for opening my eyes.

List of Tables and Abbreviations

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Abbreviations

GSA/QSA: Gay-Straight Alliance/ Queer-Straight Alliance

SGM/ SGMY: Sexual and Gender Minorities/ Sexual and Gender Minority Youth

TNB: Transgender and Non-Binary

SOGI: Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

2SLGBTQ+: Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Plus (encompasses other identities not represented in the acronym such as asexual, nonbinary, intersex, and more).

Chapter 1: Introduction

As I stood in my old classroom where I spent six years, now a substitute, I felt many things. I felt a longing for a sense of comfort and familiarity, for the simplicity of the way things were when I was living and teaching here. I felt, maybe, a sense of sadness that this is no longer my home. I also felt an inability to see things the way I did before. I returned to Alberta in the Fall to start my data collection with teachers and recently graduated students from various Catholic school districts in the province. Being back home also meant catching up with friends and spending time with family, and of course, substitute teaching for my English teacher friends, mainly at the school where I taught English for six years. Being back in that school while I did my data collection made me feel like some sort of spy, straddling the world of insider-outsider, blurring the lines. I love coming back; I love seeing the people I worked with for so long, recognizing my students or siblings of students I have taught, and I love seeing the incredible work the teachers in my department are continuing to do. So, it is hard not to feel a sense of longing, of missing this place.

I am also reminded, because of this project, that working in this environment caused me a lot of frustration. It's what led me here. This time, it was hard *not* to notice the blatant lack of 2SLGBTQ+ representation. There are some small flags or stickers in the classrooms of my friends. I saw one GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) poster. You are probably thinking, *well, it's a Catholic school. That's hardly shocking, is it?* When I worked in a Catholic school, increased visibility for our 2SLGBTQ+ students was my mission. It was certainly clear in my classroom between my GSA posters, flags, stickers, and GSA announcements on my chalkboard. I also tried to get down to the intercom whenever I could to advertise club meetings or events. All of this might seem rather unremarkable in comparison to a secular school, but it felt like a big win from previous years, when it seemed the club barely existed. But being back now, my heart sank at the noticeable decrease in visibility.

One night during my stay, a friend invited me to *The Coming Out Monologues*, an event put on by the Queer Arts Society in Calgary that brings together storytellers and artists to share experiences and revelations. All the performances touched on the experiences of coming out, sometimes once, sometimes multiple times, sometimes to oneself, sometimes to others, and the difficulties, expectations, rejection, and celebration that is a part of the constantly evolving

journey. The performers spanned various orientations, genders, ages, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, urban and rural. The performances were happy and sad; I laughed, and I also cried. One of the performers was a teacher in a Catholic school. He talked about the splitting of oneself, keeping important parts of himself and his life closed off and protected, before deciding to be fully open with his sexuality with his colleagues and students. Religion was a theme that encompassed several of the performances, same with rural and traditional conservative attitudes, sometimes in combination with Christianity. The performers shared stories of hiding their authentic selves just to feel accepted, stories of rejection by those they loved, and stories of leaving home and finding it again in people who accepted who they are. These performances felt incredibly important, especially in Alberta's current atmosphere.

I don't meet many Albertans in Montréal. When I talk about being from Alberta, I often get comments like, "Isn't Alberta the Texas of Canada?" By this, of course, most people aren't referring only to cliches about beef, oil, and gas, but the province's reputation of conservative politics. Albertan politics raise images of energy corporations, anti-vaccine and anti-Trudeau sentiment, and now, parental rights legislation surrounding the use of pronouns, gender-affirming care, and the teaching of sexuality education. These things have not exactly earned it the best reputation with many Canadians. I have certainly encountered my fair share of conservative attitudes in Alberta, but more often than not, I have encountered open-minded, concerned, and compassionate people. But it would be naive to say that there isn't an atmosphere of tension in the province since the COVID-19 pandemic. Like many other parts of the country, Alberta has become susceptible to the polarization of topics such as healthcare and education, in particular, gender identity and sexual orientation (SOGI) education.

The day after *The Coming Out Monologues* I walked over a bridge near downtown where I saw a trans flag and the words, "there is no hatred here" spray painted (why didn't I take a picture?). It was small, but it felt big to see that message sprayed in this place. Sometimes it's exhausting seeing hateful attitudes in the media and mainstream politics. I have found myself, many times, explaining to others that there are people doing good work and enacting change in this province. Things like *The Coming Out Monologues,* or this little bit of graffiti on a bridge, remind me that there are people here who are fighting for visibility, safety, compassion and understanding to make a safer space for everyone.

Study Context

I grew up in a religious culture which encouraged conservative heteronormative views about gender and sexuality. This was problematic for my older brother, who, now a happily married and proud gay man, remained in the closet, leading a double life, until he was thirty years old. He resisted being open about his sexuality due to fear of our parents' beliefs and the bullying he faced when he was in school. Overall, students and teachers have come a long way since my brother graduated high school in 2001. Yet, I have encountered homophobia, resistance, fear, and discomfort towards 2SLGBTQ+ issues as a teacher in Catholic school settings.

In my previous school, the GSA had gone through an uphill battle. It was formed by students years ago, but was forbidden to advertise, and students were not permitted to do anything more than eat lunch and talk. Since then, due to a more accepting administration and continuous student advocacy, they have won some battles: at the time of my teaching there, they were able to advertise, have a space in the yearbook, and participate in the club fair. However, many activities were still stifled by the school district. For instance, in honor of National Coming Out Month, students wanted to place posters of diverse 2SLGBTQ+ Canadians around the school, which was quickly rejected. Discouraged, many students retracted their involvement in club activities.

One year while teaching in this environment, one of my International Baccalaureate students requested I supervise their research essay on homophobia in our Catholic school district versus the city's secular public district. They received permission to conduct interviews with students from various schools for their research. The differences in the experiences of homophobia, bullying, and mental health issues between Catholic students and public students were stark. Until this moment, I had been under the naive impression—based in my own interactions and experiences—that such cases of sexual and gender discrimination were rare and that we had made great strides in Catholic schools in improving safety. These findings were sobering. They motivated me to do more for this group of students in my school and eventually pushed me to graduate studies, and the research presented here.

Chapter 1 will present an overview of the study by providing the historical and legislative context, the study's purpose and significance, as well as researcher positionality. Chapter 2 will provide a discussion of theoretical framework for this study, including an examination of Foucault's discourses of sexuality (1978 [1990]) and discipline (1975 [2012]) as utilized by

Callaghan (2018) in exploring power and sexuality in Alberta's Catholic schools. The chapter also explores Freire's (2018 [1970]) ideas for liberation in conjunction with Tuck and Yang's (2013) youth resistance and theories for change to consider possibilities for resistance in Catholic schools. Lastly, Chapter 2 provides an overview of Dorothy Smith's Institutional Ethnography (2005) as the methodology for this study. Chapter three provides a review of the literature in the areas of gender and sexuality in education, operations of power in Catholic schools and consequent 2SLGBTQ+ discrimination in these spaces, and the rise of right-wing populism and anti-gender movements and their subsequent implications for education. The literature review ends with a discussion of current scholarship in 2SLGBTQ+ resistance in oppressive educational contexts. Chapter 4 presents a brief snapshot of relevant terms and religious, federal, and provincial policies to set up the findings of the study, which are divided into two chapters. Chapter 5 examines the findings in relation to the first research question, investigating factors that hinder and contribute to teacher and students' resistance to homophobic/ transphobic rhetoric in Catholic schools. The experiences of participants offer insights that are useful to understanding the findings of Chapter 6, which explores participant responses to the introduction of new legislation in Alberta which mandates parental consent and notification for student's use of preferred names and pronouns, thereby drawing conclusions on the implications for safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ youth in Catholic schools. Finally, in Chapter 7, I revisit my two research questions to discuss the social relations of Catholic schools, the work of students and educators, and to bring elements of the theoretical framework into conversation with the findings of Chapters 5 and 6. This chapter closes with a discussion on resistance in light of my findings, and a brief examination of the study's limitations and possibilities for future directions.

The Research Project: Background

In Alberta, parents have the option to send their children to two types of publicly funded schools: secular public or Catholic, a right entrenched in the British North America Act of 1867. Publicly funded Catholic schools in Canada must navigate a dual obligation: following Catholic canonical law while complying with provincial and Canadian legislation. For these schools, Section 2 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects their religious freedoms. This can, at times, come into conflict with Section 15, the equality clause, which protects individuals from discrimination based on sexual orientation. Catholic schools are bound to uphold the Church's conservative stance on human sexuality, recognizing only two genders and endorsing

marriage strictly for procreation. This doctrine takes issue with same-sex attraction and gender diversity, yet schools must also abide by the Canadian Charter. In practice, educators in these schools face the challenge of integrating Catholic beliefs into all aspects of school life while supporting a diverse student population, highlighting the clash between religious doctrine and the rights of sexual and gender minority (SGM) students.

To further understand the tension between religious expression and sexual and gender minority rights in publicly funded Catholic schools, it is useful to briefly examine the values and policies that shape their operations. An important document that applies to all Canadian Catholic Schools is the *Pastoral Ministry to Young People with Same-Sex Attraction* written by The Commission for Doctrine of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB) in 2011. This document outlines the Catholic stance on homosexuality that is to be permeated through schools. In summary, the ministry emphasizes the intrinsic dignity of all people, however, makes clear its stance that human sexuality, as planned by God, can exist only in the marriage covenant between a man and woman, and any act outside of this is morally wrong. This document is detailed further in Chapter 4: Policies, texts, and institutional language. Such doctrines assist Catholic schools in navigating Catholic beliefs and human rights since schools must support inclusivity based on the Charter and provincial legislation (also detailed in Chapter 4). Pastoral documents allow schools to control the visibility of such clubs and students, or else they risk fully accepting homosexuality as an act. In my own experience, this control of visibility can have dire consequences, such as allowing homophobia to fester, censorship of teachers, or incidents of harassment going unreported, due to a belief that nothing will be done because of the Catholic stance on sexuality. In Catholic schools, sex education is covered in religious classes which teach Christian family values, often excluding, and maybe even condemning, homosexuality or diverse gender identities and expressions, ostracizing 2SLGBTQ+ students further. Due to such religious beliefs, students may also lack support at home for their sexual or gender identities. Rather than school offering a potential source of safety and reprieve for these students, it can be a hostile place due to homophobia and transphobia.

In Canadian Catholic secondary schools, 35% of 2SLGBTQ+ students believe school staff are homophobic or transphobic, compared to 8% of those who do not attend Catholic schools (Peter et al., 2021). As a result, these students are less likely to report incidents to staff although they are twice as likely to experience verbal harassment regarding sexual orientation

and gender identity (Peter et al., 2021). While some Canadian Catholic schools have made progress toward creating safer spaces for students with the introduction of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), 70% of 2SLGBTQ+ Catholic school students reported that they felt they did not belong in their school (Peter et al., 2021).

In late 2023, thousands protested across Canada in the 1 Million March 4 Kids opposing Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) programming in schools (Bueckert, 2023). Recent legislation in Alberta reflects this oppositional point of view and demands parental consent for student's use of preferred pronouns and names (Cecco, 2023; French, 2024). In February 2024, United Conservative Party leader Danielle Smith announced Alberta's forthcoming implementation of new policies, which later became known as Bills 26, 27 and 29 (Government of Alberta, 2024), concerning gender identity and expression (French, 2024). The proposed changes included Bill 26, the banning of both top and bottom surgeries for those under 18 and prohibiting hormone therapies for those under 16 unless approved by parents, physicians, and psychologists (Dryden and Lee, 2024). Bill 27 proposed parental consent for pronouns and preferred names for individuals aged 15 and under, while parental notification is mandated for those aged 16 and 17 as well as a requirement for parental "opt-in" for teaching about gender identity, sexual orientation, and sexuality by teachers, and a necessity for ministry approval for third-party materials covering these topics (French, 2024).

In Alberta, opposition to legislative changes affecting transgender and non-binary youth sparked considerable pushback. Medical professionals and academics strongly opposed proposed restrictions, arguing that such measures disregard established evidence and could harm vulnerable youth, and urged the province to reconsider these changes (Sousa, 2024). Criticism has also come from within the 2SLGBTQ+ community, with concerns raised about inadequate consultation and the potential impact on marginalized youth (Sousa, 2024). In Catholic schools, where religious doctrine already poses a barrier to visibility, such legislation constitutes an added layer of oppression. At the time of writing this, Bills 26, 27, and 29 passed Royal Assent and effectively went into law in December 2024.

The Research Project: Purpose and Significance

The project investigates the compounded impacts of Catholic doctrine and recent parental rights legislation on SGM students and allied educators, unveiling how the social relations of

various institutions work together to shape experiences of educators and students across these school settings. The inquiry is framed by two key questions:

1. What factors hinder or contribute to teacher/student resistance to divisive homo/transphobic rhetoric in the face of institutional repression?
2. How are safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ students in publicly funded Catholic schools shaped by recent provincial legislation in Alberta?

To answer the above questions, this study focuses specifically on Bill 27, now known as The Education Amendment Act (2024), particularly the policy surrounding parental notification and consent for sharing of preferred pronouns and names.

This project utilized Institutional Ethnography (Smith, 2005) as a methodology to situate individual experiences of educators and students to uncover the myriads of institutional texts and processes that coordinate their actions. Dorothy Smith's concept of the *problematic* in IE is a starting point for investigation. It builds from participant experiences, drawing on what is known about one's work to uncover the unknown; this being the power that is present and absent in the everyday and coordinating actions in connected ways (Smith, 1987; 2005). The problematic in this study was not whether teacher and student resistance were being hindered or bolstered, or whether new legislation surrounding pronouns and preferred names would impact safe spaces in schools. Coming from own experience as an educator, I already knew that institutions such as the Catholic Church, the school board, and UCP government policies put up barriers to 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy in Catholic schools, and that teachers and students were resisting in various forms. This was the starting point of my inquiry. The problematic, as it evolved from my conversations with participants, was the patterns amongst experiences across participants and their various contexts, causing me to examine *how* barriers to 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy were being organized. This revealed the intentional and insidious tactics utilized by Catholic school boards to enforce their values and keep teachers and students in line. It was these tactics, however, that spurred resistance and resilience in the face of institutional repression. The everyday actions taken by students and teachers in their allyship and advocacy work exposed a network of texts and policies that extended far beyond individual schools.

The findings of this study revealed insights from ten educators and three recent graduates from Alberta's Catholic secondary schools, all of whom have worked to make Alberta's Catholic schools safer spaces for all youth. Their accounts highlight the tensions, frustrations, and

disconnect between the lived experiences of teachers and youth in these schools, and school board and government policies made in the supposed best interest of children and parents. This study also offers a more in depth focus on the hostility towards transgender and nonbinary (TNB) identities in comparison to LGB identities in Catholic schools because of a societal shift, in conjunction with a rise in right-wing populism, of less accepting attitudes concerning matters of gender identity and expression. The goal of the research project is to contribute to knowledge for educators, school officials, and policymakers about how policy shapes the day-to-day experiences of teachers and students attempting to navigate spaces safely and to better support them in their goals of educating and thriving in schools. While this study focuses on secondary publicly funded Catholic schools, the experiences discussed have implications for all grade levels and types of schools.

Statement of Positionality

I approach this research not as a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, but as a committed ally and an educator learning from my students. I bring my professional experience into this research as an educator who has navigated these spaces. Since I have had the authoritative role of a teacher, it is my responsibility to use this privilege to speak alongside young people, to give them the courage to share their voices, and to provide the tools they need to make more inclusive spaces for their communities however they see fit. I am not here to speak for any community or decide what they need, but to stand in solidarity with them, and work together to dismantle systems of power that hide behind the lens of religious acceptance, neutrality, and the well-being of children. This thesis represents an exploration of the ways educators and students are already resisting systems of power; the findings and analysis reveal how institutional structures such as government, school board, and religious policies govern and shape the realities of 2SLGBTQ+ and allied youth and educators, yet the participants here showed a keen sense of awareness of the insidious procedures restricting advocacy. Because of this, they were skilled in navigating these obstacles, finding loopholes, and creating spaces to challenge the norms enforced by their schools and provincial government. Tuck and Yang (2013), in their discussions surrounding youth resistance and theories of change, claim that forms of youth resistance do not always align with stereotypical public depictions of empowerment and ideal citizenship. In this study, the resistance of youth and of their allied teachers, do not always look like typical depictions, such as outright mobilization and protest. The work of survival,

advocacy, visibility, and allyship, often through flat out refusal to enact policy, while mitigating layered institutional forms of homophobia and transphobia, are profound forms of defiance.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework, Methodology, and Methods

Theoretical Framework

This research is guided by Dorothy Smith's Institutional Ethnography (2005), queer theory, and Foucault's theories of power and repression to further understand how existing power relations within Catholic education operate and navigate gender and sexuality. In understanding possibilities for educator and student resistance as responses to the institutional repression of 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity, I draw on Freire's emphasis on dialogue for liberation (Freire, 2018 [1970]) in tandem with Tuck and Yang's (2013) discussions about theories of change and youth resistance.

Queer theory proposes that sexuality is embodied in various levels of social life, expressed and enforced through binary divides (Stein and Plummer, 1994). Catholic doctrine enforces these divides, advocating the belief that there are only two genders (male and female), and sexual relationships are structured around the concept of family life as a sacred commitment between man and woman. The lens of queer theory is useful in examining the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ youth in this context, as it recognizes and rejects the constraints of binary gender categories, unveiling gender and sexuality as fluid spectrum of different yet interrelated pieces of identity. Such an approach allows for an exploration into how power is constructed in relation to sex and gender, shaping individual expression of identity (Watson, 2005). Additionally, queer theory aims to interrogate areas not commonly associated with sexuality (Stein and Plummer, 1994), such as schools. Schools are far from neural spaces; sexual norms and assumptions about what is societally acceptable and what is deviant is embedded in the internal organization and design of schools, from physical boundaries, segregation of sexes, discipline, and the content of lessons (Foucault, 1990 [1978]).

Schools are often spaces of exploration of self and relationships for children, yet there exists a constant tension between education and sexuality, found in the promotion and integration heteronormative values (Gilbert, 2014) through the subtle structuring of school settings around gender norms. Cisgender heterosexuality is privileged in schools, with mainstream curricular materials rarely centering non-heterosexual experiences, reflecting the perspectives of those in power (Callaghan, 2018). These perspectives and norms permeate school structures, reinforced through a hidden curriculum encompassing policies, official curriculum, events, and dress codes

(Meyer, 2010). Meyer (2010) describes schools as a battleground in the culture wars between progressives and conservatives, where teachers are given the task of policing sexuality and gender. Within this battleground, Gilbert (2014) proposes that the figure of "the child" and its best interests stand in for adult desires, bearing the burden of politics. Yet, despite being central to these political debates, children lack a voice, and their right to information is subjected to their parents' decisions regarding their moral and religious education, especially when schools introduce family life or sex education (Gilbert, 2014).

The obsession with children's innocence and the denial of children as sexual beings can be understood through Foucault's discourses of sexuality (1990 [1978]). Foucault contends that the 18th and 19th centuries saw an explosion of discourse that formed sexuality as a historical and social construct. This included various discursive strategies to handle the contentious issue of child and adolescent sexuality: the separation of grown-ups and children, the segregation of boys and girls, the dangers of masturbation and the focus on puberty, and methods of surveillance suggested to parents (pp. 30, 46). With regards to Christianity, Foucault names canonical law and the Christian pastoral (this refers to spiritual care and guidance provided by clergy through various forms), as two areas that governed licit and illicit sexual practices, focusing on the domain of marital relations and their prescriptions, in addition to the list of sins and acts against nature and their condemnation (pp. 37-38). Under such a system, heterosexual married couples functioned as a strict, quiet norm, shifting the focus to matters of child sexuality, homosexuals, and others (p. 38).

Today in Catholic schools, this surveillance of sexualities takes the form of doctrinal disciplining through various church and district documents to ensure that teachers permeate Catholicism in all areas of school life. Callaghan (2018) argues these institutional policies operate through fear, causing teachers and students to police their own behaviors, in turn making it difficult to create safe spaces in Catholic schools. Callaghan (2018) compares this self-surveillance to Foucault's Panopticon (2012 [1975]). The Panopticon refers to a surveillance mechanism in which the prisoner is always seen but can never see; this constant surveillance assures a perpetual functioning of power (Foucault, 2012 [1975]). Callaghan (2018) uses the metaphor of the panopticon for the doctrinal disciplining of non-heterosexual people and ideas in publicly funded Catholic schools, calling it a "disciplinary gaze" (p.182) creating "a regime of silent disciplining" (p.182), resulting in behavioral conformity to Catholic policies (Callaghan,

2018). I would argue that this metaphor of the Panopticon can be extended further as a tool of Alberta's new legislation which polices student sharing of pronouns and the teaching of gender identity and sexual orientation.

Foucault's concept of biopower (1990 [1978]) can be used as a framework to understand sexuality and gender as a political issue with regards to such legislation. Biopower can be understood as the management of bodies and control of populations to sustain life; it is a power in need of "regulatory and corrective mechanisms" which "effects distributions around the norm" (p.144). Because sex is crucial to the management and sustainability of life, Foucault argues it becomes central to political, economic, and ideological and moral operations (p. 146). Government legislation around gender-affirming medical care, pronoun use, and sexuality education are part of efforts to regulate the ways in which people express gender in relation to the traditional gender binary. Foucault's notion of power is productive; it shapes norms, including those around gender identity and expression. In this thesis, this theoretical grounding is useful to understand the educational climate of Catholic education--Catholic doctrine supports the gender binary, advocating for respect of God's original creation. The gaze of the panopticon to enforce Catholic values in Catholic schools acts as a surveillance tool for the governance and regulation of gender and sexuality by state institutions, such as the Church and government.

Repression and Resistance

Catholic schools exist to uphold Catholic ideals and produce students who will follow them, yet within these spaces some teachers and students resist through small everyday actions (Callaghan, 2016, 2018). Callaghan (2018) utilizes Foucault's notion that where power operates, resistance is present (1990 [1978]) to illuminate pockets of resistance in Catholic schools. Foucault categorizes power as repressive and normalizing (2012 [1975]); repressive power tells us what not to do, whereas normalizing power acts in more insidious ways, convincing us to take certain actions or follow certain norms such as through the previously mentioned biopower and panopticon. Repressing discussions of sexuality further draws attention to it, resulting in prompting further discussion of sexuality and the construct of sexual identities (Foucault, 1990 [1978]). Callaghan (2018) uses this concept of repression to argue that the avoidance of sexuality in Catholic schools makes students and teachers more willing to speak on the topic; in other words, the more the Catholic Church aims to repress gender and sexuality in schools, the more they feel the need to address it through doctrinal documents, inviting resistance and subversion. I

propose the same can be said for the current political climate. The more stakeholders, parents, and the government attempt to repress sexual orientation and gender identity in schools, the more students and teachers are made aware of these issues, in turn, creating opportunities for opposition. This is already evident in Alberta as educators, youth organizations, and medical professionals have spoken out against new legislation (French, 2024).

Resistance and Change

To better understand the possibilities for resistance under the oppressive gaze of Catholic doctrine and provincial legislation, I turn to Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2018 [1970]) and Tuck and Yang's *Youth Resistance Research and Theories for Change* (2013). Drawing on my experiences working as a teacher-ally in this system, there are several concepts from both works that I regard as useful in understanding how resistance operates in such conditions.

Freire's (2018 [1970]) asserts that to be liberated, we must reveal the ideologies and patterns that sustain the dominant order and conditions of the oppressed. To enable the oppressed, dialogue, a praxis where reflection and action come together, is a necessity. Freire discusses some anti-dialogical approaches which reflect the institutions at play in this research. The first being that of *divide and rule*, an approach that opposes unification to keep the oppressed alienated, divided, and thereby keep the dominating forces in power. This includes partially recognizing the problems faced by a community and the development of leaders who are cut off from the rest of the community, speaking for them (not with them) and their interests, and in doing so, hindering the development of one's critical consciousness, the ability to discern the forces of oppression shaping one's reality and act against them. Freire emphasizes *manipulation* and *cultural invasion* as other anti-dialogical approaches. Manipulation, a response to the oppressed beginning to achieve consciousness, can take the form of supposed pacts between oppressors and the oppressed, giving the impression of dialogue between groups. Cultural invasion refers to the imposition of the dominant worldview, in this case, Catholicism and heteronormativity, inhibiting expression and establishing a feeling of inferiority amongst the oppressed. These anti-dialogical approaches are useful in conceptualizing how school administration and governments operate in ways that superficially recognize the problems faced by 2SLGBTQ+ students and allies but enact policies that stifle transformative change.

In approaching resistance by youth and educators to restrictive parental rights legislation and Catholic doctrine, I take my cue from Tuck and Yang (2013) who claim that "schools are

sites of social reproduction and possibility" (p.2), that theories of resistance cannot be generalized, are always in context, and that resistance is happening all the time, is incremental, and "is a constant dialectic" (Kelley, Tuck & Yang, 2013, p.95). Youth, though deemed by society as not fully ready for self-determination, is "a legally, materially always raced/ gendered/ classed/ specialized category around which institutions are built" (Tuck and Yang, 2013, p.4). Tuck and Yang (2013) argue that youth, as a structural location, is often conflated with a developmental category, which Kelley, Tuck, and Yang (2013) argue reduces change to something done for and to youth, even though young people are already at the forefront of change, pushing against social policy (p. 92). Youth resistance does not require the help of adults, but can be aided by their allyship, especially in schools. I see this working in parallel to Freire's idea (2018 [1970]) that teachers and students engage cooperatively in the task of unveiling reality so that it may be transformed through praxis (reflection and action), where educators work *alongside* students, not *for* students. Resistance might feel unperceivable when dealing with multiple layers of institutionalized oppression, but it is important to pay attention to the ways in which it is unfolding in Catholic schools, and what new possibilities are being imagined. To understand resistance, "we cannot hold it apart from the conditions under which it occurs" (Tuck and Yang, 2013, p.5) and to pursue change, we must understand the conditions in which people live (Freire, 2018 [1970]). This focus on the conditions of people is central to Smith's Institutional Ethnography (2005), which aims to discover organization of people's everyday by power structures; when we can see the ways institutional systems organize our realities, we can begin to uncover opportunities for change.

Methodology: Institutional Ethnography

Institutional Ethnography (IE) was developed by Dorothy Smith in seeking a feminist research strategy (Smith and Griffith, 2022). It is "a sociology that takes up a stance in people's experience in the local sites of their bodily being and seeks to discover what can't be grasped from within that experience, namely the social relations that are implicit in its organization (Smith and Griffith, 2022, p. xiv). Historically, IE is rooted in political engagement as a response to the women's movement of the 1970s, taking the standpoint of the oppressed as a sociology for people, rather than of people (Campbell and Gregor, 2002; Smith and Griffith, 2022). This is in line with Freire's belief (2018 [1970]) that people should be the objects of education, not the subjects. As a methodology, IE explores how one's knowledge is organized, by whom and what,

thereby illuminating power structures (Campbell and Gregor, 2002). Callaghan's comparison of power operations in publicly funded Catholic schools to Foucault's Panopticon (2018) reveals that the power structure of the Catholic church shapes students' and teachers' ways of knowing and being to reinforce its views. Institutional Ethnography can therefore serve as a useful methodology to further examine how policies at school, church, and government levels control and shape the lived experiences of students and educators.

To understand the influence of social relations on experience, IE utilizes the concept of *work* to examine what people do. Smith and Griffith (2022) redesign the notion of work from paid labor to "the generous conception of work" (p. 41), referring to that which people do with intention, time, and effort, under explicit conditions, and is ethnographically observable. Through dialogue and observation, Institutional Ethnographers focus on work to bring into view what people do in real situations in coordination with others' work, thereby revealing relations beyond individual experience, in other words, that which is not visible in day-to-day tasks (Smith and Griffith, 2022, p. 42).

The confrontation and analysis of these everyday tasks illuminates another important concept to IE, that of the *problematic* (Smith, 1987). The problematic is a way to determine the starting point of one's inquiry, taken up from the everyday world; Smith states that the problematic acknowledges the permeation of "the present and immediate with the unknown elsewhere and else when and the strange forms of power that are at once present and absent in the everyday" (Smith, 2005). While the problematic may begin in individual experience, it is a "territory to be discovered" (Smith, 2005, p.41) which "moves to explore the social relations in which that experience is embedded," bringing those relations that are not individually distinct under scrutiny (Smith, 2005, p.41).

The dominating forces which shape individual experience are known as ruling relations (Campbell and Gregor, 2002). Ruling relations are common yet intricate textually enforced systems of relations that connect people across time and space, taking the form of corporations, government, educational systems, and so on (Campbell and Gregor, 2002). These texts are replicable, can be seen by more than one person, in more than one place, at one time, and are present in the ordinary actions of our daily lives (Smith and Griffith, 2022). Texts are important to IE's social ontology (Rankin, 2017) and serve as "crystallized social relations" (Campbell and Gregor, 2002, p.79) that can then be used by researchers to uncover social organization,

potentially uncovering generalized practices that unfold in similar ways for different people in differing situations and locations (Rankin, 2017).

IE draws on standpoint theory, which centers an individual's experiences in formulating and understanding their perspective. This standpoint must come from those who are ruled (Campbell and Gregor, 2002). The standpoint then becomes a point of entry to discover and map social relations beyond individual experience (Smith, 2005). IE requires the researcher to take a stance (Campbell and Gregor, 2002), and in my case, I take the stance of the students and teachers who challenge district and provincial policies as the point of inquiry. While teachers have the power to shape the experiences of vulnerable students, I also recognize that they are ruled by district and provincial mandates. IE can help uncover how individuals are simultaneously active in and subject to the organized power of institutions, showing how "we are all *organized* to participate in ruling relations; in the developed world, there is no one immune from their power" (Rankin, 2017, p.2). Entering this research with background experience as an educator in an Albertan Catholic school district provides me with a foundation in understanding the policies, language, and some of the challenges faced by allied educators.

Study Methods

This study utilized semi-structured interviews with two informant groups: educators and students. The study attracted 10 educators from three Alberta Catholic school districts, two from major cities and one smaller municipal district. The informant positions ranged from middle and high school teachers to mental health therapists, and those in leadership positions. I sought educators working presently or recently in Alberta's Catholic school districts who identified either as part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community or an ally. As a result, the study attracted educators actively involved in allyship: leading their school GSAs or similar social justice clubs, humanities teachers intentionally incorporating gender and sexuality into their teaching, and educators working in equity-related consultant positions.

I also wanted to include a student perspective. Given what I knew through my own experience about the hesitancy of Catholic schools' in openly discussing 2SLGBTQ+ matters, I knew that speaking with students directly in schools would not be permitted. Therefore, I sought students who had graduated from an Alberta Catholic high school in 2023 or 2024, so that they would at least have a fresh understanding of what it is like to exist, and potentially resist, in a Catholic school amidst the province's current political climate. I interviewed three student

informants: one trans student, one nonbinary student, and one allied cisgender heterosexual student. All the student participants had attended Catholic school in Alberta since elementary.

All the informants participated in semi-structured interviews which questioned their knowledge of formal and informal policies surrounding gender and sexuality, awareness of staff and student attitudes, 2SLGBTQ+ support, including the functioning of GSAs, and their abilities to actively engage in or, in the case of educators, address topics of gender and sexuality in school. Such questions aimed at tracing the institutional structures which shaped the experiences of informants in Catholic schools and their abilities to resist homophobic and transphobic rhetoric. The second half of the interviews asked informants to detail their reactions to the United Conservative Party's proposed legislation (Bill 27) and how they believed it would impact student safety and visibility in Catholic schools. Often, these discussions implied that safe spaces were already being impacted by a shift in political climate and attitudes. At the time of the interviews, the UCP's legislation had not officially passed. Since then, the Government of Alberta successfully passed the legislation in December 2024, in the form of Bills 26, 27, and 29 (Government of Alberta, 2024).

All the interviews were transcribed and all informants assigned pseudonyms. During data analysis, I used the IE analytical method of indexing (Rankin, 2017) which involved annotating transcripts for institutional language, work in relation to GSAs and district policies, staff and student attitudes towards 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity, as well as attitudes to Catholic schooling, references to policies and texts, "invisible" forces, UCP legislation, common experiences, and recommendations. Upon selecting evocative pieces of data from each informant, I also highlighted those pieces that indicate resistance against homophobic and transphobic policies and attitudes. Throughout the process of indexing, I noted common experiences and frequently mentioned policies. Lastly, I visually mapped (Rankin, 2017) the ruling relations (School boards, the Catholic Church, the Government of Alberta) shaping the decisions and actions of key stakeholders: educators, students, administrators, and parents. This visualization allowed me to see the myriads of connections between stakeholders, their decisions, and the texts that shape them.

To conduct my data collection, I travelled to Alberta. Throughout the process of interviewing participants, I kept field notes. After each interview I would quickly write down my impressions of how I felt after listening, what stood out to me, and what connections were made

amongst participants. Eventually my field notes also became a space for me to record how I felt being back in my home province, subbing for my old school board, while conducting these interviews. Considering my position as an insider in the world of Catholic schooling, this process allowed me to recollect on what I previously did not think about at all; language or practices in schools that I accepted as typical, were now illuminated differently with the lens of researcher. Therefore, these field notes became a valuable source of ethnographic data, highlighting areas of focus in data analysis, and situating my role and experience in this process as someone who held the standpoint of an educator in these schools, as well as a researcher interested in illuminating these processes. These notes guided me in beginning this work, and are included in chapter 1, as well as providing the basis for the findings presented in this thesis. In the following chapter, I will explore the literature that this project is situated within.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to examine the dual impacts of religious school board and provincial policies on 2SLGBTQ+ and allied youth and educators in the context of Alberta's publicly funded Catholic schools. This literature review delves into the complexities of contemporary Catholic schooling in Canada regarding the expression of identity for sexual and gender minority (SGM) youth. A review of the literature includes a discussion of gender and sexuality in education and implications for SGM youth, the rights and operations of publicly funded Catholic education in Canada, the intersection of religion, parental rights, and gender and sexual minority rights in schools, including a discussion on the progression and importance of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in secular and Catholic schools. Additional examination includes literature on the rise of right-wing populism and anti-gender movements in Canada, the U.S, and Europe, their framing as "parental rights" movements, and its implications for sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) education. The themes extracted inform the investigation into the impact of Catholic doctrine and right-wing policy on 2SLGBTQ+ youth in Alberta's publicly funded Catholic schools, as well as exploring avenues for activism and resistance.

Gender and Sexuality in Education

When it comes to gender and sexuality, schools are not neutral spaces. Schools propagate the prevailing values of society, as such, there exists a perpetual tension between education and sexuality in school (Gilbert, 2014; Meyer, 2010). The gender binary and heterosexual norms are produced and maintained in various harmful ways in schools (Woolley and Airton, 2020), enforced through a hidden curriculum, a concept which refers to the subtle reinforcement of norms through elements such as policies, mission statements, government-mandated curriculum, gendered bathrooms, dress codes, and gendered behaviors through play and school activities (Meyer, 2010; Meyer et al., 2016). Callaghan (2016) explains that schools also utilize a null curriculum: that which is not actively taught is just as revealing of cultural values as what is taught. In schools, cisgender heterosexuality is privileged and normalized though routines, rarely centering non-heterosexual experiences in curricular materials, instead reflecting the perspectives of those in power (Callaghan, 2018; Fetner et al., 2015). EGALE Canada, an organization dedicated to advancing the well-being of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, conducted their Second National Climate Survey, "Still in Every Class, Every School" (2021), gathering 4000+ responses from grades 8-12 to assess school climate. The survey reveals that schools uphold

cisgender heterosexuality, reinforcing the gender binary and causing harm (Peter et al., 2021). This survey supports the claim that dominant heteronormative values contribute to gendered bullying and harassment in schools (Meyer, 2010), highlighting the privileging of cisgender identities through language and practices that validate some students and marginalize others (Peter et al., 2021).

The gender binary has consequences for everyone. Wolley and Airton (2020) propose that all individuals are assessed in relation to recognized gender norms and categories, even if they are not on the trans-spectrum, resulting in potential harm for those not easily slotted into one of the binaries. Therefore, the imposition of restrictive gender norms is harmful for all students, and it is in everyone's best interests to make gender expectations less restrictive (Meyer et al., 2016; Woolley and Airton, 2020). School boards and educators have a legal responsibility to protect students from discrimination and to create safe learning environments that are inclusive of sexual diversity (Meyer, 2010). The ignorance of these responsibilities hinders effective implementation of inclusive policies, programs, and curricular materials in schools, thereby neglecting hidden and marginalized perspectives which jeopardizes student safety, health, and academic engagement (Meyer, 2010). This neglect of full inclusion can lead to potentially devastating consequences for 2SLGBTQ+ youth.

Harassment and Discrimination of 2SLGBTQ+ Youth in Schools

Much of the literature addresses the extreme risks faced by 2SLGBTQ+ youth in hostile environments. Students who are not easily categorized into dominant notions of heteromasculinity or femininity are larger targets for gendered harassment (Klemmer et al., 2019; Meyer, 2010; Meyer, 2008; Pascoe, 2012). This includes verbal harassment (homo/bi/transphobic language in the form of slurs and derogatory comments), cyberbullying, physical and sexual harassment, and discriminatory policies such as rules around pronouns, gendered washrooms, and discipline measures for bullying (Earnshaw et al., 2020; Kosciw et al., 2022; Meyer, 2008; Meyer, 2010; Pascoe, 2012; Peter et al., 2021). Studies note that sexual harassment is higher for transgender students (Earnshaw et al., 2020; Kosciw et al., 2022; Peter et al., 2021) and that they face different forms of verbal harassment in forms such as deadnaming and misgendering (Earnshaw et al., 2020). Additionally, 2SLGBTQ+ students of color experience gendered harassment in addition to racism (Earnshaw et al., 2020; Kosciw et al.,

2022; Peter et al., 2021), highlighting the need for an intersectional approach in responding to school-based 2SLGBTQ+ harassment.

The effects of 2SLGBTQ+ bullying in schools are well documented (Kosciw et al., 2022, Peter et al., 2021; Meyer, 2010) and include increased risk for emotional distress, social isolation, higher levels of depression and suicidal ideation, lower self-esteem, poorer educational outcomes, decreased sense of safety, and coping mechanisms to escape hostile environments such as drug use and high risk sexual behaviors (Kosciw et al., 2022; Peter et al., 2021, Meyer, 2010). EGALE's School Climate Survey (Peter et al., 2021) reinforces the need for adults and school personnel to enact change. It is notable that much of the literature mentions the lack of teacher intervention into gendered harassment (Earnshaw, 2020; Kosciw et al., 2022; Meyer, 2008; Pascoe, 2012; Peter et al., 2021), thereby placing responsibility on youth. Based on a review of the literature (Earnshaw et al., 2020; Callaghan, 2018; Gilbert, 2014; Kosciw et al., 2022, Meyer, 2008; Meyer, 2010; Pascoe, 2012; Peter et al., 2012) there is a clear and urgent need for schools to stop perpetuating harmful heteronormative standards and create safer spaces.

Gay Straight Alliances. As a response to negative impacts on 2SLGBTQ+ mental health, several studies (Di Stasio et al., 2023; Fetner et al., 2015; Iskander and Shabtay, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2022;) have examined the importance of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) in schools, which were created "to promote well-being, create safer spaces, and combat victimization (Di Stasio et al., 2023, p. 145). Fetner et al. (2015) compare the experiences of students in GSA and non-GSA high schools across Canada and the United States based on support from authority figures, experiences of harassment, and ability to form friendships. Students at GSA schools reported more supportive staff and more friendships with students across a variety of sexual identities. Similarly, Di Stasio et al. (2023) conducted a study examining GSAs in Western Canadian High schools. Their findings also show positive results such as higher self-determination, fewer bullying experiences, increased sense of belonging, and autonomy. Active GSAs in schools can challenge dominant depictions of youth as innocent and heterosexual and promote agency and activism to dismantle discriminatory school environments (Iskander and Shabtay, 2018).

Comparatively, in schools with no GSAs, findings (Fetner et al., 2015) indicated active opposition from staff, more isolation, and smaller friendships groups; in fact, these students were less open about their sexuality, and staying closeted about their identity served as a barrier to

forming friendships. Worth noting is the fact that both studies (Di Stasio et al., 2023; Fetner et al., 2015) indicate the positive impact of GSAs regardless of attendance; simply "knowing a club exists provides comfort" (Di Stasio et al., 2023, p. 146). Findings show that although bullying exists in GSA and non-GSA schools, in GSA schools, the impacts are positive for all students (Fetner et al., 2015), indicating that increased visibility of marginalized experiences can reduce bias and hostile attitudes. In some schools, forming a GSA can be difficult due to administrative resistance, making teacher support a crucial factor in GSA success. As Fetner et al. (2015) state: "Teacher support was critical for our participants, who lacked the power to take on these opponents themselves [….] in schools where no adult is willing to champion the group, it is much more difficult for students to found them" (p. 577). This is a useful consideration for publicly funded Catholic schools, where teachers may be hesitant to represent students because administration may be even more resistant to 2SLGBTQ+ visibility due to district pressures to uphold Catholic values.

Publicly Funded Catholic Education in Canada

Context

To understand the unique challenges of publicly funded Catholic schools and their attempts to usher in more inclusivity, it is helpful to review their history and institutional operations in the literature. *The British North America Act of 1867* enshrined denominational rights for Protestant and Catholic separate school systems, a point often invoked in defense of Catholic doctrine by Catholic school boards (Callaghan, 2014; 2018). However, these schools are operated by a board composed of publicly elected school trustees, thereby making them legally accountable to provincial governments (Callaghan, 2014). Today, publicly funded Catholic schools only operate in three provinces: Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario.

To my knowledge, Callaghan is the only researcher who has conducted an extensive study examining the operations of power in publicly funded Catholic schools in Alberta. Callaghan (2018) notes that due to The Canadian Charter of Rights' guaranteed protection for the freedom of religion (Section 2) and an increase in secularization across Canada, most Canadians rarely question the workings of Catholic schools, unaware of the discriminatory actions towards sexual and gender minority groups. This is in part due to the media's failure to competently cover news stories that include religion and sexuality (Callaghan, 2018) which allows Catholic

schools to manage conflict between religion and gender and sexuality internally (Callaghan, 2018). Therefore, many Canadians lack an awareness of how doctrine surrounding gender and sexual minorities is circulated within Catholic schools (Callaghan, 2014). Because responses to sexual diversity and gender identity and expression differ in Catholic schools and within doctrine, these two categories will be examined separately with regards to 2SLGBTQ+ discrimination in Catholic schools. However, first it is useful to understand how control operates within these school systems and the effects of that control on teachers and students. Callaghan (2018) argues that power operates through repression and discipline in Catholic schools. The power operations of these school systems can therefore make it difficult to investigate discrimination and pursue substantial change. To better understand the barriers to inclusive change, it must be understood how power operates through day-to-day practices in Catholic schools. Several key factors appear frequently in the literature (Airton et al., 2022; Callaghan, 2014, 2016, 2018; Maher, 2007; Martino, 2014) which influence these practices: surveillance, pastoral documents, and the priority of the parent.

Operations of Power: Surveillance and Pastoral Documents

A major barrier to teachers' ability to fully support 2SLGBTQ+ students in Catholic schools is the ways in which Catholic school leaders communicate policies for handling SGM youth. Catholic doctrine regarding gender identity and sexual orientation is disseminated to schools through documents known as pastoral guidelines. Discussion of these documents is covered extensively in the literature by Callaghan (2014, 2016, 2018), who uses the metaphor of Foucault's Panopticon (2012 [1975]) to explain how surveillance and discipline functions through such doctrine on nonheterosexuality. Callaghan (2018) describes the Panopticon as a form of self-surveillance where individuals, unaware of when or by whom they are observed, self-monitor their behavior to avoid punishment. In analyzing Ontario's pastoral documents, Callaghan (2014) notes that these documents enable educational leaders to observe and correct the behavior of non-heterosexual teachers and students. These documents also police the conduct of teachers or students advocating for inclusivity, leading to self-policing among educators if they deviate from Vatican values. This type of policing causes educators to fear religious pushback, which in turn negatively affects the school climate and limits the possibility for intervention (Newman, 2018) when they encounter discrimination or harassment.

Religious homophobia and discrimination are institutionalized in Catholic schools through these religious documents. Newman's (2018) study found a pattern of using religious texts to justify 2SLGBTQ+ exclusion, and verbal and physical harassment. These documents share a common thread: the promotion of the Catholic concept of "love the sinner, hate the sin" (Callaghan, 2018; Martino, 2014), portraying gender and sexually diverse youth as victims in need of “pastoral care” which typically involves prayer and counseling (Callaghan, 2016; Maher, 2007). The Catholic Church disseminates its hegemonic power to influence curriculum through these documents (Callaghan, 2016). Therefore, it follows that, as indicated in the literature, (Callaghan, 2014; 2016; 2018; Martino, 2014), when new challenges regarding 2SLGBTQ+ rights arise, local bishops quickly respond with new documentation, which is then disseminated throughout schools to regulate behavior.

A frequently referenced example of this in the literature is the response of Catholic schools to Gay-Straight Alliances (Callaghan, 2014, 2018; Iskander and Ashbay, 2018; Martino, 2014). The creation of Bill 13, The Accepting Schools Act (2012) in Ontario is a commonly cited example (Callaghan, 2014; Iskander and Ashbay, 2018; Martino, 2014). Leanne Iskander, An Ontario Catholic high school student, requested a GSA at her school and was denied on grounds of religious rights, resulting in an appeal to the provincial government which lead to the establishment of Bill 13, requiring all schools (secular and Catholic) to support students wishing to establish and name a GSA (Iskander and Ashbay, 2018). During this process, the Ontario Catholic Bishops took issue with the naming of these clubs and their activist nature, instead offering alternative spaces in the general name of social justice or equity (Callaghan, 2014; Martino, 2014). Such spaces were based on pastoral guidelines which promote the path of celibacy for non-heterosexual Catholics, framing homosexuality as sinful and intrinsically disordered (Callaghan, 2014). Studies (Iskander and Ashbay, 2018; Martino, 2014) emphasize the importance of using queer-specific language in naming clubs to ensure visibility to students, claiming that the refusal of LGBTQ specific language indicates a superficial commitment to tolerating, rather than affirming, sexual and gender minorities. Catholic policies around club names are an example of using doctrine to regulate identities which transgress Catholic principles of sexuality such as family life and marriage (Martino, 2014).

Other recently cited examples include the Edmonton Catholic School District's (ECSD) prohibition of a transgender student from using the girls' restroom resulting in a policy formed by the Archdiocese of Edmonton (Callaghan et al., 2023). This resulted in a human rights complaint by the mother of the transgender child, ensuing in the Alberta government's production of *Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientation, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions (2016)*, which outlines the need for schools to protect LGBTQ+ students in the form of respecting pronouns, names, dress, access to gender-segregated activities and washroom choice (Callaghan et al., 2023). As a response, bishops demanded the guidelines be revoked on the premise that "The Catholic belief is that the human person is created 'body and soul' together, that God created human beings male and female (Mark 10:6) and that we are all called to care for and respect our bodies as they are created (Smith 2016, 1, as cited by Callaghan et al., 2023, p. 579), successfully transforming the guidelines into optional recommendations for schools to follow. This poses a problem as recommendations permit districts to follow discriminatory Catholic doctrine under the guise of faith, allowing Catholic schools to avoid accountability (Callaghan et al., 2023). This complicates matters for teachers and students advocating for gender diversity acceptance, as these guidelines can be readily dismissed by Catholic schools if not legally mandated. The cases of GSAs and washroom choice speak to a pattern in the literature where activists push for change and are challenged with Catholic doctrine, showing how Catholic schools dismiss provincial and even federal gender and sexuality protections in favor of a higher law, being God and the Vatican (Airton et al., 2020). In this way, pastoral documents are used to manage and surveil the behavior of students and teachers to keep in line with doctrine.

The Right of the Parent

Parental Rights in Education. Parental rights are broadly defined in the literature (Clarke, 2010; Fowler and Mountz, 2024; Magsino, 1982; Stewart, 2023) as encompassing the freedoms, duties, morals, and ethical standards in the determining the upbringing of a child, including a parents' involvement in their child's education. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms does not explicitly mention the term "parental rights", however sections 2 and 7 safeguard freedoms linked to a parent's authority over their child's moral and religious education, assuming parents act in their child's best interests (Clarke, 2010). Scholars explain that the subjective nature of what is considered the best interest of the child will at times naturally lead to a conflict between

parental autonomy versus the responsibility of schools to provide curriculum that prepares socially responsible citizens in pluralistic settings (Clarke, 2010; Magsino, 1982). Parental rights and family values is discussed later in the literature review in relation to the rise of right-wing movements.

The Catholic Priority of the Parent. Finally, the church's influence in Catholic schools operates by prioritizing parents as the primary educators of their children (Callaghan, 2014; 2018). While the importance of parental voices is recognized in public secular schools, pastoral documents on nonheterosexuality emphasize that educators must respect parental consent, asserting that parents bear "the principal moral responsibility of educating their sons and daughters in matters of human sexuality" (CCCB, 2011, p. 6). Research indicates that it is unclear how information about a students' sexuality or gender identity may be handled at home, therefore prioritizing parents as the principal educators may be problematic for students in abusive homes (Callaghan, 2014), especially when considering racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities among 2SLGBTQ+ youth who may face religious as well as cultural-based rejection (Newman, 2018). Given that youth experience religious homophobia from various sources, these factors must be considered when addressing parental rights in cases of sexual orientation and gender identity. The Catholic prioritization of parents as the primary moral educators enforces the previously mentioned surveillance of teachers and students in Catholic schools, who, aware of this commitment to parents, may avoid discussing nonheterosexuality, conceal their own identities, or refrain from addressing or reporting harassment.

The Importance of Positive Parental Support. There is ample literature to support the effects of parental support or lack thereof on 2SLGBTQ+ youth and emerging adults (Abramovich and Alberta, 2015; Bregman et al., 2012; Choi, 2015; DeCants et al., 2015; Tankersley et al., 2021; Taylor and Neppl, 2023; Travers et al., 2012; The Trevor Project, 2023). Sexually specific family support is associated with affirmed identity amongst 2SLGBTQ youth (Taylor and Neppl, 2023); therefore, caregiver acceptance is critical in the developmental stages of youth. Research indicates that youth with affirmed identities feel more accepted and show lower levels of difficulty in coming out, whereas family rejection is associated with higher levels of depression, substance abuse, suicidal ideation, and negative feelings towards sexual identity (Bregman et al., 2012; Taylor and Neppl, 2023; The Trevor Project, 2023). The need for positive adult support is

more urgent for transgender/ non-binary (TNB) youth, who are reported as less likely to disclose to a parent and less likely to be accepted (The Trevor Project, 2023). The literature (Tankersley et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2012) reports that transgender youth with supportive parents are more likely to show positive mental health outcomes such as life satisfaction, stronger self-esteem, and less consideration of suicide. Parents may be one of the first points of disclosure in the coming out process, therefore they are associated more strongly with mental wellness (Tankersley et al., 2021).

While there are clearly supportive parents and caregivers, identity-based conflict with family is a major contributing factor to 2SLGBTQ+ youth homelessness (Abramovich and Alberta, 2015; Choi 2015; DeCants et al., 2022), indicating that the family is one of the first systems to fail sexual and gender minority youth due to internalized heterosexist ideas often conveyed through harassment (DeCants et al., 2022). This is further supported in the literature which shows there is an over representation of 2SLGBTQ+ persons in youth homelessness (Abramovich and Alberta, 2015; Abramovich, 2017; Choi 2015). Trans youth are even more at risk for homelessness due to higher rates of physical and sexual abuse and family rejection (Choi, 2015). The Trevor Project findings (2023) point to an association between lower rates of adult acceptance and lower gender identity disclosures in addition to the increase of anti-transgender legislation and rhetoric in the American political landscape. For this reason, it is pertinent to consider the unique struggles of transgender and non-binary youth in Catholic schools and in society at large.

2SLGBTQ+ Discrimination and Harassment in Catholic Schools

While 2SLGBTQ+ youth experience discrimination in secular schools, the atmosphere in Catholic schools can be particularly hostile. Literature notes that as more nonheterosexual and gender-nonconforming individuals come out, their challenges become more visible, and the demand for sexual and gender minority rights increase (Biegel, 2018; Callagan, 2018). The Vatican's position on human sexuality and gender identity however has remained unchanged, often conflicting with non-discrimination principles in Canadian law, provincial human rights codes, and progressive educational policies (Airton et al., 2022; Callaghan, 2018; Callaghan et al., 2023; Herriot and Callaghan, 2018; Meyer, 2010; Martino, 2014).

Existing literature (Callaghan, 2018; Newman, 2018; Peter et al., 2021) highlights 2SLGBTQ+ educators' and students' struggles in Catholic schools, revealing instances of direct and indirect harassment and discrimination. In a study with Toronto LGBTQ+ youth, Newman (2018) observed that faith-based educational systems, particularly publicly funded Catholic schools, were seen as toxic environments. EGALE Canada's school climate survey (Peter et al., 2021), reflects responses from Catholic school students, revealing higher incidences of harassment and lower reporting rates among 2SLGBTQ+ youth in Catholic schools: students are twice as likely to face verbal harassment compared to non-Catholic counterparts, and they are less likely to report harassment for reasons such as doubts about staff support (69%), fear of being outed (47%), concerns for safety or retaliation (33%), perceptions of staff as homophobic or transphobic (35%), and acknowledgment of staff involvement in harassment (9%) (p. 57). These findings parallel *Homophobia in the Hallways* (Callaghan, 2018), a study where students from Catholic schools in Alberta and Ontario report being outed to families by the school, verbal harassment from peers, low self-esteem and self-harm, and inadequate teacher responses, coupled with silencing of student advocacy. Among 2SLGBTQ+ teachers in the study, experiences ranged from harassment from staff and communities, potential job loss due to sexuality or gender identity, and the need to lead double lives to avoid discrimination.

Transgender and Non-Binary (TNB) Issues in Catholic Schools

There is a variety of approaches and possibilities in the literature (Airton et al., 2022; Callaghan et al., 2023; Herriot and Callagan, 2018; Woolley and Airton, 2020; Wright-Maley et al., 2016) towards gender diversity within Catholic schools. Firstly, a common pattern is the conflation of transgenderism with gender diversity and expression, and the subsequent conflation of these terms with sexual orientation (Airton et al., 2022; Herriot and Callaghan, 2018; Meyer, 2008, Wright-Maley et al., 2016). Airton et al.'s study (2022) examines Ontario Catholic and secular school board documents for language relating to gender diversity in light of Ontario's Bill 33, *Toby's Act*, an amendment to the province's human rights code to add protection against discrimination of gender identity and expression. Their findings show a focus on sexual orientation terminology, indicating that gender diversity is not developed enough in Catholic educational policy. This conflation is supported by the lack of visible transgender representation in curricula of LGBTQ topics, linked to the belief that sex and gender are the same (Herriot and Callaghan, 2018; Wright-Maley et al., 2016). Meyer (2008) claims that the social construction of

gender binaries, when combined with hegemonic heterosexism and masculinity, is the root of gendered harassment, especially for gender nonconforming individuals. Transgender and nonbinary (TNB) students face higher discrimination and lower acceptance (Tankersley et al., 2021; Travers et al., 2012; Trevor Project; 2023). Therefore, there is a need for schools to confront how they enforce the gender binary as more youth begin to identify as trans in schools (Herriot and Callaghan, 2018), and because of the negative implications for students who do not express their gender in expected ways, even though they may be heterosexual (Airton et al., 2022; Meyer, 2008; Woolley and Airton, 2020). Airton et al.'s (2022) comparative analysis of Ontario Catholic and secular school board documents show that Catholic boards use less diverse language pertaining to gender and sexual diversity, as evident in the comparatively low usage of terms such as transgender(ed), trans-positive, intersex, and sexual identity to name a few, as shown in Table 1 (Airton et al., 2022) below:

Term	Ontario public secular district school boards	Ontario public Catholic district school boards
Transition	121	0
Crossdress	24	0
Cisgender	21	0
Woman	13	5
Man	8	5
Boy	2	0
Girl	2	0
Non-binary	10	2
Two-Spirit	53	1
Genderfluid	19	0
Biological sex	37	3
Sex	315	165
Female	22	3
Male	20	3
Intersex	77	0
Transgender	194	14
Transgendered	20	9
Transgendered/transsexual	76	0
Transsexual	0	2
Trans-positive	10	0
Transphobia	63	3
Sexual identity	4	0
Gender variant	38	1
Gender independent	15	0
Gender diversity	79	1

Table 1: *Occurrence Comparison Between Data Sets: Use of Gender Diversity Terminology* (Airton et al., 2022, p. 601)

The lack of or minimal usage of terms that are actively used by 2SLGBTQ+ groups is a common attribute in Catholic documents and is known as microinvalidation, a refusal to use the words a community uses to describe themselves, thereby showing a lack of respect for the group described (Sanders, 2013). Airton et al. (2022) also note that the use of terms associated with gender diversity tend to be reactive, rather than proactive, used to address harassment, discrimination, and discipline. In other words, reference to gender diversity only arises when

there is a problem to be solved. Similarly, Meyer et al.'s study (2016) of K-12 Canadian educators and their work with transgender and gender creative students found that if there was no identified transgender or gender-creative student in a school, the staff were less motivated to learn about gender-diverse practices.

Scholars show that it is only when Catholic schools are confronted with instances of transgender or gender diverse students seeking accommodation that a change in policy may result if enough pressure is applied (Airton et al., 2022; Callaghan et al., 2023; Herriot and Callaghan, 2018). For instance, language such as "gender expression" and "gender identity" had only been added to some Ontario Catholic school board documents after increased pressure from stakeholders (Airton et al., 2022). Callaghan et al. (2023) examined a notable case, that of the Edmonton Catholic School Board's challenge to the creation of the Alberta government's *Guidelines for Best Practices: Creating Learning Environments that Respect Diverse Sexual Orientations, Gender Identities and Gender Expressions* after a transgender student was banned from using the girl's washroom. Similarly, the case of Tru Wilson, a transgender child in a Vancouver Catholic school who wanted to use the girl's restroom and wear the girl's uniform, led to a trans-affirming policy by the Catholic Independent Schools of the Vancouver Archdiocese (CISVA) known as the *Elementary School Policy regarding Gender Expression and Gender Dysphoria* (Herriot and Callaghan, 2018).

Many studies focus on the exclusionary practices and language of the Catholic Church towards 2SLGBTQ+ people (Airton et al., 2022; Callaghan, 2018; Sanders, 2013; Woolley and Airton, 2020; Wright-Maley, 2016) which Sanders (2013) argues maintains socio/political hierarchies and silences those with "embodiments of human difference" (p.31). The Catholic stance on gender and sexuality, and more specifically transgenderism — being that God created male and female and to transition is to separate God and creation (Woolley and Airton, 2020) — is communicated and transmitted through the Catechism of the Catholic Church, including in schools (Herriot and Callaghan, 2018; Woolley and Airton, 2020). As schools are already the most hostile environments for trans people (Wright-Maley, 2016), such doctrine promotes further hostility. Wright-Maley's (2016) study on transgender inclusion in Canadian Catholic elementary schools claims that efforts for further inclusion are perplexed by tensions among Catholics, some of which support greater tolerance of sexual and gender diversity as part of

Catholic social teachings, and others that maintain traditional ideas. The study also shows that while some younger teachers may be more likely to embrace diverse views on gender, a combination of lack of training, knowledge, and professional and institutional constraints hinder inclusive practices. Most importantly, the study showed that teachers are cognizant of a lack of institutional solidarity and societal misunderstandings of gender diversity, causing them to act in fear of losing their livelihoods resulting in concealment of identity, values, and remaining silent or offering generic support for diversity (Wright-Maley, 2016). These educator responses are relevant in understanding not only institutional repression within Catholic schools, but also the challenges of supporting gender and sexual diversity in schools in an increasingly polarized climate, where rising far-right ideology fuels ideological debates and hostile rhetoric.

The Rise of the Right Wing and Anti-SOGI Rhetoric

The rise of right-wing political movements in the United States and Europe is well documented over the course of the last several decades (Graff et al., 2019; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Mudde, 2019; Ross, 2017), however, recent years have seen a resurgence in part to unprecedented information accessibility (Perry et al., 2022). This resurgence is categorized by several authors as "right-wing populism" (Graff et al., 2019; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Lo Mascolo, 2023; Perry et al., 2022; Prearo, 2024). Mudde (2019) defines populism as a "thin" ideology that believes in the distinct separation of society into two groups: the corrupt elite and the "pure" people, who argue that "politics should be an expression of the *volanté générale* (general will) of the people" (p. 193). Mudde (2019) and Ross (2017) note that today's populism can be categorized within the "radical right" as a socially conservative movement that rejects gender and sexual diversity, and seeks a closed society focused on the creation of national identity. While it accepts principles of democracy, it opposes core elements of liberal democracy, such as minority rights, the rule of law, and the separation of powers (Mudde, 2019). Graff and Korolczuk (2022) refer to populism as the unification of the people through their opposition to a common enemy.

Unlike the extreme right, which is more revolutionary-oriented, the radical right is reformist in nature but still enacts exclusionary and racist policies (Mudde, 2019). However, the definitions for the various forms of right-wing politics are not clear cut (Ross, 2017). This is evident Mudde's (2019) assessment of the rise of the "fourth wave" of the far-right movement,

which is characterized by its heterogeneity, opposition to political correctness, and most importantly, its mainstream presence which entails its revival in areas where it was once restricted, and the incorporation of populist right-wing policies by mainstream politicians.

In the United States, a frequently mentioned turning point towards right-wing populism has been the election of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016 (Giroux, 2022; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Krueger et al., 2021; Lo Mascolo, 2023; Perry et al., 2022). Trump, in his campaign, positioned himself as a man of the people and delivered rhetoric that focused on an "us" vs "them" message, framing minorities (immigrants, feminists, and others) as unfairly privileged while labeling the most privileged as victims (Perry et al., 2022). Krueger et al.'s 2021 study on Black and Latinx sexual minority adults pre and post the 2016 American election reveals deteriorating mental health, linked to setbacks in LGBTQ+ civil rights like the transgender military ban (2017) and increased hostility and violence. Perry et al. (2022) cite Trump's election as a turning point for increased hateful rhetoric in Canada as well, as seen in the rise of right-wing hateful activity towards visible minorities online and in-person. As stated previously, the resurging populist movement is diverse (Mudde, 2019), constituting a host of actors who have found ways to build alliances around common goals. This alliance building is referred to by Graff and Korolczuk (2022) as *opportunistic synergy*, a dynamic consisting of political, ideological, and organizational connections "that enable wide scale elite change in government bodies, academia, cultural institutions and civil society" (p.7). Some of these overlapping interests can be found amongst a global and growing anti-gender movement, and within Christianity, including the Catholic Church.

The Anti-Gender Movement

As previously stated, the rise of the right is a diverse movement unified by a global antifeminism and anti-minority sentiment (Graff et al., 2019). The anti-gender movement is characterized as regarding gender as a system of condemned moral and social reforms that include reproductive rights and technology, LGBT rights, gender studies, protection against gender-based violence, and sex education (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). Within the anti-gender movement, various stakeholders come together to oppose these topics (Prearo, 2024), which in recent years, Graff and Korolczuk (2022) claim have come under fire and become central to the culture wars at the same time that the populist right wing has

expanded its influence in Europe, South America, and the USA. The relationship between right wing populism and gender is widely discussed (Graff et al., 2019; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Lo Mascolo, 2023; Mudde, 2019; Prearo, 2024; Venegas, 2022). Kuhar and Paternotte (2017) clarify that anti-gender movements are not direct consequences of the right-wing populism's growing prominence; however, the right reinforces the ideas in campaigns due to their shared ideological structures.

As a focal point of right-wing populist movements, the aim is to reject and dismantle feminist and queer constructs of gender and gender equality, vilified through anti-gender discourse which sets innocent gender-conservatives against corrupt elites (Graff et al., 2019; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). Central to anti-gender movements and right-wing populist discourse is an antagonism towards feminism and an appeal to hypermasculinity, asserting that feminism is responsible for the oppression of men in social, political and economic spheres (Graff et al., 2019). This is a part of an anti-modern rhetoric which consists of a nostalgic longing for a seemingly more peaceful and simpler time where the gender binary was reflective of sex-at-birth and reinforced through traditional gender roles (Gilbert, 2014; Graff et al., 2019; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Perry et al., 2022). Several authors recognize that at the core of this nostalgia is the support of family values (Graff et al., 2019; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte; 2017; Mudde, 2019; Venegas, 2022). Developments in gender equality, LGBTQ and reproductive rights are seen as threat to the traditional heterosexual family and part of a larger global agenda which aims to dissolve it (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). This belief is prominent in anti-gender movements and within the far-right, which views traditional heterosexuality as essential to the goal of the survival of the nation through reproduction (Mudde, 2019). The threat is further applied to the safety of children with concerns about sexualization, indoctrination, and pedophilia with exposure to gender ideology (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). It is this focus on preserving traditional family values that connects right-wing populism and anti-gender movements to the Christian Right and the Catholic Church.

The Role of Religion

Far right ideologies can include a range of religious perspectives (Mudde, 2019). Religious focus in right wing populism is common in countries where Catholicism is part of the national identity such as Poland or Italy (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte,

2017; Lo Mascolo, 2023; Prearo, 2024) and in the United States, where the link between the far right and Christianity is strongly rooted in extreme ideas of a Christian nation and identity (Mudde, 2019; Ross, 2017). It is important to note that Christianity is not a monolith and there are a variety of stances and approaches to issues of gender and sexuality amongst churches and followers. Previous studies (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Lo Mascolo, 2023; Prearo, 2024) note that the Vatican has distanced itself from radical right-wing groups in disagreement with their strategies and ambitions, despite being aligned in some aspects of their ideologies; many mainstream churches support liberal democracies and consensus-oriented dialogues (Lo Mascolo, 2023). In fact, Lo Mascolo (2023) asserts that the approach of the Christian right threatens core Christian principles of equality and respecting human dignity. Despite this, the Roman Catholic Church has a history of actively fighting against reproductive rights and the legitimization of homosexuality stemming from the theological perspective of the complementarity of the sexes and therefore, concerns that the natural family will be destabilized (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017). The fact remains that there is a significant overlap between gender, politics, and religion in the current political atmosphere as many populist right-wing parties across the globe have formed alliances with ultra-conservative religious figures and organizations, exploiting and politicizing religion in tandem with anti-gender rhetoric to increase popularity (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Lo Mascolo, 2023).

The Catholic Church can provide a substantial network for mobilization for anti-gender efforts, and in return, Christianity can regain a more prominent role in the public sphere which has been reduced in many secular nations (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017), and its followers enter into a collective that affirms their faith (Prearo, 2024). Overall, while the populist right-wing does not need to be religious, gender has played a key role (Graff et al., 2019) in mainstreaming the Christian right. The Christian right, according to Lo Mascolo (2023) is characterized by their ideology: rejection of abortion and LGBTQ+ rights; championing of heterosexual patriarchal family models; the collective over the individual, duty over liberty, and religion over secularity; a well as their network of institutions ranging from political parties in government, individual politicians, and religious groups. The extensive network of influence works as a strategy to eliminate more open-minded faith approaches to gender and sexual diversity (Graff et al., 2019); this has implications not only for faith-based spaces such as churches and schools, but also for secular spaces due to the mainstreaming of right-wing ideas.

Implications for Education

The endorsement of sexist, misogynistic, and traditional gender role ideas, and subsequent scapegoating LGBTQ+ groups and women for the feminization of men (Perry et al., 2022) have the potential to influence schools and impact vulnerable, marginalized youth in already hostile environments. Schools and children specifically become the battlegrounds in the culture wars between the left and right (Gilbert, 2014; Meyer, 2010). Giroux (2022) argues that since the COVID-19 pandemic, rising exclusionary nationalism has heightened the political centrality of education, including the championing of conservative educational reforms by far-right politicians, thereby situating teachers in a culture of fear where teaching about racism, sexism, or social justice generates "McCarthy-type repressions" (p.2). This situation is particularly concerning in Catholic settings where discrimination against sexual and gender minorities is heavily institutionalized, thereby intensifying opportunities for oppression in schools.

LGBTQ+ students are caught in the middle of conservative educational reforms. Gilbert (2014) proposes that the queer child is perceived solely through an adult lens, burdened by adult desires, never able to be themselves. The heteronormative family narrative is central to LGBTQ+ issues (Gilbert, 2014), and conservative rhetoric, as depicted through previously discussed right wing populist, Christian right, and anti-gender movements. In the recent surge of ultra-conservative movements in Canada and the United States, it is unsurprising that right-wing rhetoric targets Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) programming in schools as a threat to the traditional family structure (Venegas, 2022). The targeting of gender in schools through movements is mobilized through campaigns that exploit emotions such as anxiety, guilt, and fear (especially amongst parents), triggering moral panics and threatening access to comprehensive education (Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Venegas, 2022). In countries such as Spain and Italy, right wing parties target the teaching of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in schools, which covers "issues related to feminist and LGBTQI+ struggles for equality, diversity, human rights, citizenship and in short, democracy" (Venegas, 2022, p. 482). Venegas (2022) provides the example of Vox, a far-right Spanish political party, which advocates parents' rejection of their children's participation in RSE, arguing that these programs challenge moral and religious convictions, in turn exerting control over teachers and curriculum through fear.

Other methods of targeting gender and sexuality involve the promotion of a return to family values, and the creation of anti-gender telephone lines and book bans in Italy amongst claims of child sexualization and indoctrination (Venegas, 2022). This echoes resistance to teaching about power, privilege, and LGBTQ+ content in American schools. Texas and Virginia have made extensive efforts to block LGBTQ+ exposure through book bans in classrooms and school libraries (Phipps, 2022), and in 2022, Florida passed the Parental Rights in Education Act (more commonly known as the 'Don't Say Gay Bill') which bans the discussion of SOGI topics up to eighth grade (Fowler et al., 2024; Goldberg et al., 2024;). At least 20 other states proposed similar legislation in 2022 (Goldberg, 2024). In Canada, U.S.A, and Europe the usual culprits behind such actions are far right political parties, the Catholic Church (Venegas, 2022) and religious-right conservative Christian factions that employ religious teachings to condemn homosexuality and silence discourse in secular institutions (Newman, 2018). For students, families, and educators who fall outside traditional heterosexual norms of gendered behavior and expressions, policies erasing gender and sexual diversity in schools have real consequences. Critics argue such actions violate legislative protections and promote stigmatization of the LGBTQ+ community and mental health of sexual and gender minority youth (Phipps, 2022). In Florida, research showed that LGBTQ+ parents expressed feelings of disbelief, sadness, and fear in response to legislation, seeking various coping methods, with large numbers considering moving out of state due to concerns for safety (Fowler et al., 2024; Goldberg et al., 2024). Right-wing educational policies like those in the United States, Europe, and as explored in this study, in Canada, reinforce the "othering" of LGBTQ+ individuals (Fowler et al., 2024) as part of the "us" versus "them" mentality required in right-wing populist movements (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Mudde, 2019). These policies are a symptom of a broader crisis tied to the defense of traditional values threatened by liberal democracy and human rights (Venegas, 2022). This othering and silencing of identities through policies can suppress supportive social networks, contribute to stigma, and promote homophobic and transphobic attitudes, solidify binary gender and sexuality categories, and hinder opportunities for inclusive discourses (Fowler et al., 2024). Despite such negative implications, potential for resistance amidst the rise of anti-gender and right-wing populist rhetoric amongst youth and educators exists in secular and religious spaces.

Possibilities for Resistance

Resistance through protest against extremism and anti-gender movements has been documented in media and scholarship predominantly in parts of Europe (Blackburn, 2025; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022). However, resistance to educational injustice comes in many different forms, from rejection of state schooling to demanding more from educational institutions, challenging curriculum, surveillance, homophobic policies, and the white supremacist and colonial projects of schooling (Tuck and Yang, 2013). Barry and Drak's study (2019) showcases 2SLGBTQ+ youth resistance to right-wing populism through art and rejection of material and neoliberal capitalist culture via fashion hacking, allowing youth to form community and knowledge. As a response to institutional homophobia in Catholic schools, resistance can take the form of creating gay-straight alliances, school campaigns, or highlighting influential LGBTQ+ figures in assignments (Callaghan, 2018; Iskander and Ashbay, 2018). Youth can also find avenues for exploring information and resistance through social media, which Callaghan (2016) refers to a form of "social artillery" (p. 271) that can show students possibilities for resistance. Studies exploring the potential of social media in creating safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ youth (Berger et al., 2022; Lucero, 2017) revealed that social media provides comfortable and safe environments for youth to explore gender and sexuality and counter heteronormative environments, something that offline spaces are not able to offer. Regardless of the form, youth resistance should be considered through Tuck and Yang's (2013) claim that resistance cannot be separated from the conditions under which it occurs, which includes the role of non-youth actors as well as institutional forces, such as schools and religion.

Within the context of Canadian Catholic schooling, several scholars have examined alternate approaches to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion and acceptance through a theological lens (Airton et al., 2022; Herriot and Callaghan, 2018; Sanders, 2013; Wooley and Airton, 2020; Wright-Maley, 2016). Some authors (Herriot and Callaghan, 2018; Woolley and Airton, 2020; Wright-Maley, 2016), argue that resistant attitudes towards transgender and nonbinary inclusion is contradictory to the goal of Catholic schooling which emphasizes pastoral care and *cura personalis*, the care of the whole person (Woolley and Airton, 2020, p. 102). Wright-Maley (2016) contends that Catholic schools cannot be viewed as monolithic in their approaches towards inclusivity; some see their commitment to pastoral care as an advantage compared to secular schools, where a lack of transgender representation is a missed opportunity to depict the

spectrum of gender expression as a divine creation — part of God's plan — an idea reinforced by Airton et al. (2022). Opening possibilities to different theological perspectives is in itself an unexpected act of resistance. The expectation may be to outright challenge Catholic beliefs about gender and sexuality. Herriot and Callaghan (2018) argue that to balance religious rights and 2SLGBTQ+ rights is a futile effort because this will perpetually place Catholicism and transness in opposition to one another; rather, they propose that theoretical imaginative spaces can be created where transgender affirmation is synergized with moral and theological dimensions. This includes biblical interpretations from a queer and transgender lens which rejects notions of the gender binary based on the premise that 2SLGBTQ+ people have always existed, seeing the divine as transcending gender, and focusing on Jesus Christ as a representative of those who are socially excluded (Herriot and Callaghan, 2018). Such interpretations open possibilities for educators in Catholic schools committed to supporting 2SLGBTQ+ students without rejecting principles of their faith.

Educators in both secular and Catholic schools in Canada find themselves situated in a difficult context — that of rising right-wing populism and anti-gender movements — to resist the institutional structure in which they operate to support 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion and visibility. These conditions influence educator's abilities to varying degrees. Kuhar and Zobec (2017) examine the influence of anti-gender movements and demands of parental rights on education and Europe, arguing that teachers should refer to human rights laws and tenets of plural democracies as the framework for public education, allowing them to distinguish between morals and values and commonalities of human experience with their students. For educators, resistance can take the form of not shying away from controversial topics on the premise that students need to be confronted with opinions that differ from their own value systems and need to be taught to respect views different than their own, as a means of protecting principles of democracy (Kuhar and Zobec, 2017). Meyer et al. (2016) suggest that schools must resist the inclination to view transgender or nonbinary students as a problem to solved and instead aim to transform school cultures to create less rigid and hostile spaces by developing student-centered, flexible curriculum that emphasizes interdisciplinary collaboration and reduces sex-segregated activities. Again, the conditions under which educators resist will shape the extent and forms of their resistance; in the face of unjust policy or institutional religious homo/transphobia, enacting some

of these suggestions and allowing small moments of agency for 2SLGBTQ+ students is an act of refusal and resistance.

Conclusion

The situation for 2SLGBTQ+ youth in publicly funded Catholic schools is urgent, particularly amid a surge in ultra-conservative rhetoric that directly targets sexual and gender diversity, posing a threat to existing progress. Despite a substantial amount of literature on the rise of right-wing populism, the Christian right, and anti-gender movements in various parts of Europe, South America, and the United States, no study has yet to explore the intersection of the current political climate in Canada and its impact on 2SLGBTQ+ youth within publicly funded Catholic schools.

The literature review delves into the pervasive heteronormative culture within schools and its adverse effects on 2SLGBTQ+ students. Specifically, it examines the exercise of power in Catholic schools through pastoral documents, surveillance, and parents' rights. These mechanisms contribute to the institutionalization of religious homophobia and transphobia. There is a concerning conflation of gender expression and identity with sexual orientation which neglects the recognition of transgender and nonbinary students' experiences and needs within school settings. The effects of these various mechanisms are evident when comparing the heightened vulnerability of LGBTQ+ youth in Catholic schools to their secular counterparts. Case studies outlined in the review illustrate a culture of fear within publicly funded Catholic schools. Nevertheless, the literature offers glimpses of resistance. Vocal students, creative expression, supportive allies, and media attention have led to positive changes, such as the introduction of federal and provincial human rights codes and the creation of supportive GSA bills.

Examining the current rise of right-wing exclusionary politics in education is a developing area of research. Existing literature emphasizes the considerable threat posed by hate-fueled movements to progress in creating safe school environments. Far right-wing and gender conservative groups view inclusivity as a threat to traditional family values and exploit social media to disseminate homo/transphobic ideas. This threat is particularly pronounced in publicly funded Catholic schools, potentially attracting those who identify with these values among their religious beliefs. Successful growth in right-wing conservative politics threatens to reverse

existing provincial legislations and has already influenced the introduction of new bills limiting expressions of gender identity for youth, as seen in Saskatchewan and Alberta. Amid growing ideological polarization and anti-gender rhetoric, there are possibilities for resistance amongst youth and educators even in the most restrictive of environments. Further areas for investigation include the influence of right-wing populism and anti-gender movements in Canada, particularly across different provinces as well as urban and rural divides, and the implications of mainstream exclusionary ideas on educators and marginalized sexual and gender diverse youth in various contexts.

Chapter 4: Policies, Texts, and Institutional Language

Within the findings (Chapters 5 and 6) and subsequent discussion (Chapter 7) various terms and texts are referenced directly and indirectly by participants. An overview of these terms and policies provides a helpful reference to better comprehend informants' experiences. This is particularly important to anchor an institutional ethnographic inquiry. Understanding the language used by informants can make visible the way in which people's activities are organized, exposing their actual doings (Smith and Griffith, 2022). The first section of this chapter defines "...the words of their profession, its institutional discourse" (Smith and Griffith, p. 47, 2022). These terms are understood by those in the institutional space of Alberta's Catholic schools and illuminate ways to understand the work of informants.

The second part of this chapter examines the documents and policies referred to in dialogue with informants. In interviews, teachers and students explained their experiences and actions. IE aims to look beyond these activities to uncover how they coordinate with those of others and how the experiences people share shape, and are shaped, by the relations organizing their actions (Smith and Griffith, 2022). In IE, work is defined as that which people do with intention, time, and effort, under explicit conditions, and is ethnographically observable (Smith and Griffith, 2022). The work of informants is coordinated through texts; they do not stand as separate from the actions of people, as Smith and Griffith (2022) state, "texts do not act; they come into play in individual's work as they coordinate the foregoing and subsequent moments of a sequence of action" (p.51). Some policies, such as legislation by previous and current governments, are mentioned directly by informants. Other texts, like the catechism of the Catholic Church, are not named by informants directly, but they shape the foundation of Catholic schools and are evident in the ways that informants understand and go about their work. The texts discussed below include provincial and federal legislation as well as relevant Catholic documents.

Institutional Terms

Administration/ Admin: This term was used by educator participants to refer to the team of principals and vice/ assistant principals in a school.

ATA/ DEHR: The Alberta Teacher's Association. This is the professional union organization for all teachers in Alberta. The ATA has a Diversity, Equity, and Human Rights (DEHR)

committee that supports teachers and students in creating safer, more inclusive spaces. This committee provides GSA/ QSA resources and a GSA for 2SLGBTQ+ teachers (The Alberta Teacher's Association, 2025). Throughout the findings, the ATA is mentioned in discussions about the "ATA Safe Space posters" which were widely distributed posters promoting 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity in all Alberta schools.

Bishop: This term is at times used by informants and refers to the local bishop for their area and therefore their school board. The bishop is the representative of the Catholic Church and responsible for overseeing the religious programming of schools. Some participants, like Joan, talked about trying to attain resources for their students, which would at times go through "the bishop" (p.76).

Catholic Values: Catholic school districts base their foundations on Catholic values as emphasized by the Catechism of the Catholic Church, a manual of religious doctrine used for instruction (detailed below). These values are often found on school websites and referenced by educators in advocating for inclusivity. Some commonly referenced values include establishing a community of caring, social justice, loving one's neighbor, equality, respect for the intrinsic dignity of the human person, and accepting difference as part of God's plan (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1993).

Downtown: Many school board head offices in major cities are located centrally, so when informants say "downtown", they are referring to the head office and those working there, which includes superintendents and directors.

Family Life: This refers to the human sexuality portion of religious education in Alberta's Catholic high schools. This term is used by teacher informant Clay when he talks about his process of teaching this unit to his religion class (p. 60-61). A student informant, Skelly, uses the term "sex education" (p.66) to describe a unit in his religion class, however, it is unlikely it would be officially referred to in that way. Instead, "family life" would be used officially.

GSA/ QSA: Gay-Straight Alliance/ Queer-Straight Alliance. These are student led clubs which advocate for acceptance, support, and allyship with the 2SLGBTQ+ community, and are discussed by every participant. The operations of GSAs in Catholic schools are essential in

revealing the work of teachers and students, and how this work is shaped by larger institutions, and therefore shapes the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ youth in these clubs.

NDP: The New Democratic Party which is mentioned by a few informants was the leading political party in Alberta from 2015-2019 under Premiere Rachel Notley. The NDP was responsible for the official mandate for establishing GSAs at a student's request (detailed below). Teacher informants Jules and Jordan reflected on the party's time in power positively for supporting teachers and students in Catholic schools in establishing 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity.

UCP: The United Conservative Party is the current political party in power in Alberta since 2019. Their leadership changed from Jason Kenney to Danielle Smith in 2022. The shift from NDP policies to UCP policies had an evident impact on 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy efforts of teachers and students. Under Jason Kenney, amendments were made to GSA legislation introduced by the NDP (detailed below), and under Danielle Smith, legislation regarding preferred names and pronouns (Bill 27) was established and is explained in the following section.

Policies and Texts: Legislation

Much of the federal and provincial human right's legislation detailed here was not directly named by participants. However, participant knowledge of the rights and protections offered to gender and sexual minorities and the responsibility of Catholic schools to follow such legislation was evident in the ways that they advocated for inclusivity and visibility.

The Equality Clause, The Canadian Charter of Rights of Freedoms: Section 15.1 of the Canadian Charter, known as the Equality Clause, establishes equality of every individual before the law and provides protection against discrimination of "race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability" (*Canadian Charter*, 1982, s 15(1)).

Bill C-16 (2017): This amendment added the prohibition of gender identity and gender expression to the Canadian Human Rights Act (3(1)) and additionally amended the Canadian Criminal Code to include gender identity and gender expression in the category of "identifiable persons" (381(4)) protected from hate propaganda (319 (1), 319 (2)).

Alberta Human Rights Act: The province's human rights code specifies, "as a fundamental principle […] that all persons are equal in: dignity, rights and responsibilities without regard to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability,

mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income, family status or sexual orientation;" (Alberta Human Rights Act, Preamble, 2000). Alberta included sexual orientation in this act in 1998 and gender identity and expression in 2015 as grounds for protection (Government of Alberta, 2025).

The Education Act: Formerly the School Act, this is a central document that details the goals and responsibilities of teachers, guardians, students, school boards, and governing bodies for the K-12 education system (The Government of Alberta). Several amendments have been made to the act over the years, the most relevant to this study being Bills 10 (2014), 24 (2017), 8 (2019), and 27 (2024), detailed below.

Amendment to the Education Act, Bill 10 (2014) and Bill 24 (2017): In 2014, The Alberta Government, under the Progressive Conservative Party, passed an amendment, Bill 10, which added sexual orientation as a protection into the Alberta Bill of Rights, and amended Section 35.1 of The School Act (now known as The Education Act) to ensure that school administration must permit the formation of student organizations such as GSAs if they are requested by a student. In 2017, The New Democratic Party passed Bill 24 which amended Section 16.1 of the Education Act, further ensuring that principals must grant the request for a GSA immediately and designate a staff liaison within a reasonable time frame from the date of the request. Bill 24 also specified that should students want to include terms like "gay" or "queer" in the names of the club, they shall not be discouraged or prohibited, regardless of the type of school they attend (Catholic or secular). Lastly, Bill 24 ensured protection of privacy to students participating in GSAs by adding a sub section to 50.1 that teachers are not required to notify parents of such participation. The impact of this legislation was evident in the fact that all participants but one had a GSA at their school that had been established for a few years. The very existence of such clubs, so consistently, across experiences, indicates students and teachers taking advantage of government-backed advocacy.

Amendment to the Education Act, Bill 8 (2019): All participants noted that their GSA was named after a Catholic value, or a term associated with diversity. None of these club names include terms like "gay" or "queer". The teachers and students recognized this was enforced by administrators and ultimately the school boards. Bill 8, The Education Amendment Act, which was passed by the United Conservative Party in 2019, made several changes, including scaling

back on some of the specific protections introduced in 2017 by Bill 24. Bill 8 amended section 35.1, still requiring principals to permit the establishment of GSAs, but removing the demand for an "immediate" approval and timely establishment of a staff liaison. With regards to the names of such organizations, Bill 8 removed the requirement that principals shall not prohibit or discourage the use of the words "queer" or "gay", but rather a name shall be chosen in consultation with the principal and may include such terms. The previously mentioned clause which protected student privacy specifically if they were part of a GSA was eliminated, however provincial privacy legislation still prevented school staff from disclosing GSA participation except for rare occurrences, such as safety threats to GSAs (French, 2019).

The Education Amendment Act, formerly Bill 27 (2024): This is the legislation that the second half of the study's findings, detailed in Chapter 6, investigates in connection to its implications for safe spaces in publicly funded Catholic schools. This act received Royal Assent on December 5, 2024. The purpose of the act is to support "families and students navigating complex conversations around gender identity, sexual orientation, and human sexuality, while also supporting continuity in a student's learning during a public health emergency or state of emergency" (Government of Alberta, 2025). This act amended several sections of the Education Act and added some new ones. These changes include parental notification for students 16 and over, and consent for those under 16, when a student requests school staff to "refer to them by a new gender identity-related preferred name or pronouns" (Government of Alberta, 2025). Staff cannot refer to students with a new name or pronouns until this notification or consent has been obtained. Additionally, school authorities must provide support through counselling or other assistance if consent/ notification is suspected "to result in psychological or emotional harm to the student, or at the student's request" (Government of Alberta, 2025). Next, this act shifts the option for parents to "opt-out" of programs of study or instructional materials to an "opt-in" system for programs, materials, instruction, or activities which includes "subject matter that deals primarily and explicitly with gender identity, sexual orientation or human sexuality" (Government of Alberta, 2025). In teaching such topics, resources used by teachers must be approved by the Minister of Education, except those being used for religious instruction. However, if an educator uses third-party resources, they require approval by the Minister of Education.

Policies and Texts: The Catholic Church

Only one participant, Jordan, a high school teacher, made a direct reference to a "document on gender put out by the Church" (p.71). However, several participants noted the Church's stance on homosexuality as presented in religion class, and on gender identity and expression, through discussions about the sharing of pronouns for instance. Based on my own experience working in an Alberta Catholic school, the content of these policies is well known amongst teaching staff and is circulated in various ways, such as teacher in-services and faith-based activities. Even if teachers do not know the exact names of these documents, their contents are embedded in the value system, and therefore the structure, of Catholic schools.

"Pastoral Ministry to Youth with Same Sex Attraction": In 2011, the Council for Canadian Bishops released a pastoral letter to young people, teachers, and guardians with regards to persons with "homosexual inclinations" (CCCB, 2011, p.1). According to this letter, its purpose is to "address the pastoral needs of adolescents and young adults who question their sexual identity or experience feelings of same-sex attraction" (p.1) and provide guidance for those in the faith community that support these young people. This is a key document for Catholic schools in Alberta as it reinforces the Church's beliefs about homosexuality, how to approach it through a Catholic lens, and reiterates the role of parental guardians and educators. Some of the key points include the avoidance of terms like "gay" or "lesbian," opting for "person with same-sex attraction" (p.1); the belief that sexuality is a gift from God, and sexual relations belong "within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman" (p.2) for the purpose of procreation, and that any genital acts outside of marriage are morally wrong. On the matter of same-sex attraction, the letter claims that "same-sex inclinations are not in themselves sinful […] same-sex attraction is not freely chosen" (p.3). However, these acts are morally wrong and "objectively disordered" (p.3) (though this does not imply the defectiveness of the person). There is an emphasis placed on living chastely for those with same-sex attraction for whom marriage is not an option. The Church believes in respect for the dignity of all persons, and people with same-sex attraction must be treated with "respect, compassion, and sensitivity" (p.1) and unjust discrimination should be avoided; and lastly, the Church recognizes that adolescents with same-sex attraction can face discrimination, isolation, and ignorance. Therefore, guidance from the whole Christian community though pastoral care and respect for dignity is needed. Parents are emphasized as

"holding the principle moral responsibility" (p.6) in educating their children about human sexuality. Educators and pastoral workers are to "assist parents, with their consent, in guiding young people in faith and "God-given dignity" (p.6).

"Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education": Issued by the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education in 2019, this document outlines the Church's position on gender theory in the context of education and offers guidance for Catholic educational institutions. The document reiterates the biblical teaching from Genesis 1:27 that human beings are created male and female in the image of God which cannot be reconceived according to human ideologies. The Vatican takes the stance that gender identity is not independent of biological sex, thereby challenging gender theory and accusing such ideas of undermining the complimentary of the two sexes and causing confusion. The document expresses concern over the spreading of ideologically driven approaches to gender, confusing children of their identity and sexuality. The text calls on Catholic schools to uphold the teachings of the Church on sex and gender, urging educators to permeate these teachings into curricula. In doing so, schools must respect the right of the parent to be the moral educators of their children. Finally, the document places an emphasis on the dignity of all persons, and respect and compassion for those experiencing confusion about their gender; schools are encouraged to foster "a path of dialogue which involves listening, reasoning and proposing the Christian vision" (p.29) and a welcoming environment for such students. Through a pastoral approach, educators are called to contribute to the "education of the human person" (p.25) in line with Christian principles.

Declaration "Dignitas Infinita" On Human Dignity (2024): This Declaration published by the Vatican and its Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith recalls "fundamental principles and theoretical premises" (Presentation, para. 6) to clarify understandings of the term "dignity", which the Church sees as infinite in that it transcends "all outward appearances and specific aspects of people's lives", (Presentation, para. 7) before presenting "current and problematic situations in which the immense and inalienable dignity due to every human being is not sufficiently recognized" (Presentation, para. 6). In discussing "gender theory" the document reaffirms that every person, regardless of sexual orientation, should be treated with consideration and respect, condemning discrimination. Other key points of the declaration include a discussion

of several violations of human dignity, including gender-affirming surgeries, stating that gender theory denies "the greatest possible difference that exists between living beings: sexual difference" (Some Grave Violations of Human Dignity: Gender Theory section, point 58); and all attempts to deny or obscure sexual difference between man and woman must be rejected.

"CCCB Statement on the Passage of Bill C-16 Regarding Gender Identity and Gender Expression" (2017): The Canadian Council of Bishops made a statement, by Bishop Douglas Crosby, in response to the addition of gender expression and identity as prohibited grounds of discrimination and hate crimes to the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code of Canada (detailed in the collection of legislation above). This response firstly emphasizes the Church's belief that "all people, regardless of how they identify themselves or the manner in which they choose to live their lives" (Crosby, 2017) possess an inherent dignity given by God and are to be treated with "respect, compassion, and love." The CCCB stated its support to protect Canadians from harm, however principles such as gender identity and expression cannot be upheld by Catholics because the Church does not separate biological sex from gender. The response ends with concerns regarding the threat of Bill C-16 to "freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of religion" (Crosby, 2017), encouraging Catholics to defend these freedoms, the beliefs of the Catholic Church, and human dignity.

Chapter 5:
Hindering and Fostering Resistance: Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the tensions between gender, sexuality, and religion in publicly funded Catholic schools, particularly considering recent provincial legislation in Alberta. This legislation (which had not been officially passed at the time of interviews) enforced an "opt-in" system for programs that deal with human sexuality, and parental consent for students' change of pronouns. This study focused on the portion of (now) Bill 27, the Education Amendment Act, which requires teachers to notify parents if a student aged 16 or 17 wants to use a different pronoun or name and requires consent for students aged 15 and under. Institutional Ethnography's concept of the problematic (Smith, 1987), begins in individual experience and acts as a starting point for inquiry. By starting in people's everyday experiences, examining the actual practices of educators and students in school settings, this study aimed to uncover the relations that go beyond the individual and how they organize everyday actions (Smith and Griffith, 2022). In listening to participants speak about their experiences with 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy and visibility in Catholic schools, connections to government and religious policies and documents were illuminated as coordinating the visibility of 2SLGBTQ+ identities and allyship in schools. This study is guided by two research questions:

1. What factors hinder or contribute to teacher/student resistance to divisive homo/transphobic rhetoric in the face of institutional repression?
2. How are safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ Students in publicly funded Catholic schools shaped by recent provincial legislation in Alberta?

This chapter solely discusses the findings of the first research question, allowing for an understanding of the complex work of educators and students in creating safe spaces and promoting 2SLGBTQ+ visibility in Catholic schools. This builds a foundation for the concerns and implications surrounding Bill 27, as per the second research question, which is detailed in the next chapter. Having worked in Alberta's Catholic schools, I already knew barriers to 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy in Catholic schools existed, and that teachers and students were resisting policy. The problematic as it developed from conversations with informants, became the similar patterns between these experiences across participants and their various contexts, shedding light on the map of relations that extended beyond the school and even beyond the school board.

These relations worked in intentional, yet subtle ways, to enforce expectations rooted in conservative and Catholic values.

Introducing the Participants

To situate the findings of this study, an overview of participants' roles and contexts is needed to better understand their perspectives and the work that they do. All the informants in this study were assigned pseudonyms, mostly inspired by their favorite books or by well-known 2SLGBTQ+ activists. This study involved interviews with ten educators from three Alberta Catholic school districts. All educators presently or previously taught humanities subjects. Three educators—Evey, Sylvia, and Clay—taught additional courses like Religion and Leadership. Two other educators, Sal and Adan, had transitioned from teaching to school board roles, with Adan working as a mental health therapist and Sal as an advisor for culturally responsive education. Teacher participants worked in different types of school environments that impacted their abilities to support 2SLGBTQ+ students to varying degrees. Jordan and Jules taught in alternative high school programs designed for older students upgrading coursework or requiring non-traditional learning pathways. The rest of the teachers in this study worked in traditional school settings. Lastly, Sylvia, Adan, and Luna all had experience working in secular school districts, with Adan and Sylvia having both permanently left their Catholic districts for secular districts. Luna had experience in more than one Catholic board. Finally, Clay was the only middle school educator in this study, meaning his younger students are impacted differently by the consent requirements of Bill 27 due to their age. Student participants included Welch, a nonbinary student, Werner, a heterosexual ally (both graduated from a Catholic high school in 2023), and Skelly, a transgender student, who graduated in 2024. All three attended Catholic schools in Alberta since elementary school. Together, the standpoints of educators as well as recent graduates make visible the social organization of these school contexts in unique ways.

Key findings in response to the first research question revealed an informant awareness of Catholic beliefs within policies, the lack of written policy leading to arbitrary verbal enforcement, inconsistent administrative support, and varied attitudes toward 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity, including more hostility towards transgender and nonbinary (TNB) identities. Participant experiences exposed an insidious pattern of vague top-down administrative decisions,

surveillance of teachers, extensive advocacy work on behalf of teachers, and student frustration and disengagement. The following sections explore each of these findings in more detail.

Informant Awareness: Catholic Beliefs and Policies

All informants were asked about their awareness of formal and informal policies regarding gender and sexuality on a school and district level. However, prior to discussing informant awareness of school board policies, it is necessary to emphasize that Catholic beliefs toward gender and sexuality serve as an organizing force through which these policies were enacted. The enactment and engagement with these policies is connected to the extensive comprehension all participants had of broader Catholic views on gender and sexuality. This awareness was mobilized in participants' understandings and, in some cases, navigation of school board policies.

Many of the educators and students in this study were raised Catholic, providing them a sense of familiarity with the beliefs and values that shape these schools. Additionally, majority of the teachers also attended Catholic schools as students. Some, like Lily and Evey, chose to work for a Catholic school board because they aligned themselves with values such as "upholding the dignity of people." Prior experiences with Catholic education laid the foundations for knowledge about teachings surrounding gender and sexuality. They used this existing knowledge to navigate policies and better support their 2SLGBTQ+ students. Board policies around sexual and gender diversity were enforced indirectly through references to Catholic beliefs, as Luna, a high school English teacher described:

> It's the way they [school board] do it, is they kind of frame it as, like Catholic values. So, it was never like directly stated that you're not supposed to, but there's always that undertone of like, you know, as a Catholic school, what we represent is a certain whatever, man, woman, made in God's image. So, you can't change what God made- it was a lot of that sort of language right, surrounding these things. That's why a lot of work that teachers were doing around 2SLGBTQ issues was isolated in the classroom.

Her awareness of this approach informed how Luna advocated for the GSA at her school. Luna wanted to organize some activities around LGBTQ+ History Month, but suspected her principal would be hesitant to allow any outright visibility. Therefore, she prepared ways that she could connect activities to Catholic values such as asking for permission to read a prayer for the LGBTQ+ community over the intercom in honor of National Coming Out Day:

> I really tried to approach it from a religious perspective, of, like, if we are preaching Jesus's teachings, wouldn't this [saying a prayer] logically follow? And then I also mentioned how, like Pope Francis allowed, has allowed, quote, unquote, trans people to now be baptized into the Catholic Church. I tried to, like reference these things that are happening in Catholic doctrine.

Luna also mentioned that she often referred to Jesus Christ as a representative for marginalized people when dealing with unsupportive attitudes towards transgender people in conversations with staff and students:

> I always try to bring Jesus into it, and I find that when I bring up Jesus, people get very defensive [...] I really try to reiterate that if we really consider ourselves to be truly and deeply Christian or Catholic, wouldn't it then bear in mind that Jesus, who was the OG [original] advocate for those who are marginalized, wouldn't it make sense that he would then be the biggest, the most supportive of this particular group, which are, especially in this current climate, one of the most marginalized in society, one of the most attacked, right? And I find that people get really defensive when I bring that up.

The defensiveness Luna mentioned shows a resistance to the merging of fundamental Catholic principles, like the belief in Jesus Christ, who embodies humility and mercy, with the acceptance of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. For Luna and other teachers like Clay, it was important to emphasize compassion when discussing the relationship between religion and sexuality. Clay, an openly gay middle school English and Religion teacher, talked about his approach to discussing homosexual relationships after reading a story with his religion class, where a man talks to his priest about the pressure he feels to have sex with another man:

> And the priest advises him you know like, you should explore chastity as an option. A healthy relationship in any capacity begins with being chaste, and you know the church doesn't support homosexual relationships. So, if you want to be a Catholic, then be mindful that sex is not an option for you[1]. But you can still have that intimate relationship with another man, so long as you don't have sex. So, we read that, and then I remind the students of like, look my job is to present to you what the Church believes. This is what the Church supports. My job is to also explore modern gender theory and we're going to take a look at how society might interpret this. Is this what the Church believes? Yes. Does it mean that you are wrong if you decide to love and be with someone? No, of course not. But know that there is that fine line. You're Catholic. This is what it means.

Clay's approach shows an understanding of the Church's stance on homosexual relationships and an acknowledgment on his part of the contradiction between what the Church endorses and what

[1] This concept is explained in the "Pastoral Ministry to Youth with Same Sex Attraction", a document released in 2011 by the Council for Canadian Bishops. This is detailed in Chapter Four.

is accepted in modern society, in addition to an awareness that as a Catholic educator, he needs to enforce Catholic beliefs without condemning homosexuality. Although he needed to teach Catholic views, he still felt it important to use a balanced approach with students:

> I do my best to try to approach both sides when it comes to family life. Again, they get both perspectives, this is what the Church believes, this is modern gender theory. So, we talk about different identities. I bring in the gingerbread man[2]. [...] I don't avoid those conversations. And I have been very explicitly clear with my administrators, this is what I'm teaching, these are the resources I'm using, and I've never had blowback.

The way Clay tackled gender in teaching religion revealed the work he does in ensuring that students get a balanced perspective, while ensuring he doesn't experience any opposition: he gathers resources and presents them, along with his intentions, to his administration, even though he is not saying anything that condemns that Church's stance.

Werner, a student informant, displayed an awareness of how Catholic beliefs permeate conversations and attitudes. Werner mentioned how the school chaplain[3] had been asked to cover his science class when his teacher was absent. During these classes, Werner stated the chaplain would "use it as an opportunity to gloat about religious rhetoric as opposed to teaching the class." Werner described a brief interaction during one of these classes:

> This chaplain[3] just started to eavesdrop on our conversation. I was just telling him [a friend] this, like, random story about how, like octopi can be gay. Essentially, he just overheard it. And like, under his breath, was like "the church would not support this". I don't really know where the relevance is, but it definitely shows just even in a scenario where there's absolutely no need for that kind of rhetoric, it's still propping up, it's always there, just like bubbling under the surface, propagating.

Even though Werner did not see the relevance of this anecdote to our conversation, it in fact illuminates the subtle yet perpetual presence of a religious gaze even in seemingly unrelated moments like science class or random conversations with friends. The examples of Luna, Clay, and Werner demonstrate the continuous permeation of religion on interactions and activities

[2] Here Clay refers to a common resource called the "Genderbread-Person", an infographic to help students explore four parts of identity: sex, gender, expression, and attraction (EGALE Canada).

[3] A chaplain is a professional who provides religious and spiritual guidance. Most Catholic high schools have a Chaplain. They are often in charge of religious events and classes at the school.

undertaken by students and teachers.

Broader School Attitudes towards 2SLGBTQ+ Inclusivity

It is helpful to detail some of the school-wide staff and student attitudes towards 2SLGBTQ+ topics as experienced by participants, as these attitudes shaped how they approached their advocacy work. Grasping these attitudes also lays the foundation for the upcoming discussion around how policy is enforced in Catholic schools, and why there is a need for advocacy from GSAs and allied educators. Every single informant in this study has witnessed or experienced homophobic or transphobic attitudes, some shaped by political beliefs, and many by religious beliefs. However, those in schools with more visible allyship from administration and teachers felt a more overall sense of acceptance in their schools. The attitudes of teaching staff significantly influenced how openly students expressed negative views. It seemed that the more visibly supportive teachers were, the less (noticeably) vocal students were. This section will briefly examine the attitudes of teaching staff and of students (as seen by teachers), student reflection on teaching and peer attitudes, and conclude with a discussion of difficulty in supporting gender nonconforming students.

Educator Perceptions of Staff Attitudes

All of the educators had other colleagues in their schools who they identified as fellow allies to varying degrees. Having more than one allied teacher in the school helped create a more positive atmosphere, according to Evey who mentioned that the staff at her school "is really open, really accepting and a lot of our staff is really, really frustrated with the direction that policies [referring to Bill 27] are heading and honestly, that is what has kept me in the building." This is echoed by Joan who said that "the [teaching] staff are really positive. I think like as a staff as a whole, they are quite supportive, and our population is really diverse. So, I think like just having a very visibly diverse, different, out community at our school, I think a lot of teachers want to support that." These descriptions of supportive colleagues are a sharp departure from descriptions of negative attitudes from some school administrators and school board officials, making apparent an evident divide between the institution of the school board (and therefore the Church), and those working within schools. This discrepancy was visible in Jules' experience. In his English class, he included an optional space for pronouns on a start-of-the-year Google Form, which he shared with other teachers in his department. This resulted in the principal "running

down the hallway telling us not to use that form." The principal then pulled Jules aside and told Jules that he is not allowed to put the pronouns on the form. In response, Jules told his principal that he did not care "if there's a policy against it, I will continue to do that even if you fire me for it." At this point, Jules' principal decided to call in [district representative] on the following PD[4] day for him to give a presentation to the staff on pronouns. He explained:

> [...] the principal had told me, [...] I hope you don't say anything at this meeting that's too offensive. And I actually said very little during that meeting, but there were many other teachers who spoke out very loudly against it. Basically, the presentation was all scripture based, and it was Bible quotes saying that God created man and woman. That's what they base this all on. There's no room for pronoun choices within the Bible. No, it did not go over very well, he [the representative] did not get a very warm welcome from the staff. Actually, he seemed pretty flustered.

Despite his principal's impression that a presentation from a board representative would enforce uniform behavior amongst staff, teachers in this scenario collectively showed their disagreement for school board, and therefore, Church, points of view, clearly perceiving their roles in supporting students as disconnected from the expectations placed on them by the board.

Of course, not all teachers feel comfortable expressing their support for gender and sexuality minority students to the same degree as Jules or his colleagues. Lily felt a lot of teachers are "in fear" explaining that "a lot of them support, but a lot of them aren't actively vocal." In her experience, if an issue was brought up at a staff meeting for example, if a teacher vocalized their opinion it was usually "a teacher that has, you know, quite a few years under their belt right, and is more informed on things, established" in comparison to a newer teacher who would be "more hesitant to speak up and say anything in a group setting, or even one on one." Lily's assessment points to a few different possibilities; new teachers in Alberta typically start their employment under a probationary contract where they undergo evaluations before they can be considered for a permanent position. A teacher in this situation may be more hesitant to express their point of view if it disagrees with an administrative directive. Also, more experienced teachers, she mentioned, tend to be "more informed on things" from school board policies, union supports, and provincial legislation governing education.

[4] Professional Development

Educator Perceptions of Student Attitudes

The teacher participants felt that students were predominantly inclusive in their schools, but they all encountered a range of attitudes amongst their student body. Jordan stated he has had students who show "extreme allyship", and others that "sort of played along" meaning they would not object to supporting a bake sale or signing a petition. Clay also felt amongst his middle schoolers that instances of homophobia or transphobia were rare; they happened, but not as often as students being "comfortable enough to share their authentic self." Joan mentioned that in her high school, "there's a lot of open and out relationships [...] there are different communities of people and massive friend groups around it and so a lot of students I do feel have more liberty to be themselves than other schools in the city." That being said, she felt that inclusivity amongst students had changed in the last couple years, stating: "I think maybe because we've seen an increase in Orthodox-Catholic Christians and maybe because it's also more of a topic these days. There's been a lot more, I've heard more students coming out and being like kind of openly homophobic and transphobic." Lily, Luna, Jordan, and Clay all mentioned students who came from more intensely religious upbringings who tended to be more vocal about their opposition, as explained by Lily:

> As far as students go, I have seen both extremes. I've seen students who are very much in support of it and are thanking teachers that are showing some level of representation, but then we have students on the other extreme who are very upset by what they're seeing in schools. So, a pride flag like mine upset a student this year, and she asked me, she said, why do you have that pride flag up in your room? It's making me very uncomfortable. It's disturbing that you have a flag like that in your room in a Catholic school. And then my response to that student was that regardless of who we are and what we represent, everyone is accepted and seen in my classroom.

Due to the Catholic Church's stance on homosexuality and transgenderism, it is hardly surprising that Catholic schools would draw religious families and students that are more conservative in their views, expecting that these school settings would be free from 2SLGBTQ+ visibility. In some schools, there were also religious clubs that drew such students. Although Jules worked in a school that he felt was more inclusive than most, his school had an "Alpha Club", a popular faith club in many schools[5]. Members of this club had "grilled" the GSA at Jules' school during

[5] Alpha is an international Christian course that educates on principles of Christianity through a series of discussions and talks (alphacanada.org).

club fair day about views on homosexuality in the Bible. The extent to which such students felt they could vocalize their views seemed to be influenced by the culture of the school.

Jordan also mentioned having more religious students in the past who were homophobic, but he felt that there was enough visible support for LGBTQ+ inclusivity at his school that those students weren't going to express it as openly. Conversely, Luna had previously worked in a Catholic school that was in an affluent and conservative area where some teaching staff and students were vocal about their LGBTQ+ opposition. She recalled two events put on by her previous school's GSA for Pride Month and International Pronoun Day that highlighted the boldness of some students. For one event, the club put out fill-in-the-blank cards that said, "I'm proud to be". She describes how "some kids ended up kind of like, putting on these cards, "I'm proud that I'm not a fag", "I'm proud that God still loves me", or something like that [...] like there was just homophobia, very much religious homophobia." For the other event, the GSA had pronoun stickers made and was distributing them. Luna said that when the club table was left unattended, some students ripped up pronoun stickers. She explained that there was "an interesting divide in the school" where one half was "super altruistic" and interested in social justice, and the other half was "more conservative and [...] proudly, vocally phobic, very not shy about advertising their views to people." Luna felt that the attitudes of the more conservative students were reflected by "the staff dynamic where there was just a huge culture of religious conservatism." Likewise, Adan recalled a staff member publicly making jokes about pronouns when his previous schools' GSA ran a "pronoun program" on International Pronoun Day, which he felt gave "other kids permission to now be jerks." Ultimately, throughout the experiences of the teacher participants, vocally homophobic and transphobic attitudes amongst students were in the minority, however it was clear that the degree of inclusivity in the school culture as modeled by school staff, influenced how outspoken students were about their disagreement.

Student Reflections: Perceptions of Staff

The student participants in this study were very aware of how teachers in their schools displayed their allyship, or lack thereof. Werner felt that that efforts for LGBTQ+ visibility and advocacy were reduced to the effort of individual teachers rather than a collective staff effort:

> There were certainly a handful of staff who made sure to like vocally, but also visually show their support. To the range that they could, I mean within their own classroom,

> whether that be like a pride flag, providing literary resources that didn't push an agenda at all, but more just kind of allowed for students to broaden their scopes on that kind of issue. So, whether it be in an English class where instead of being kind of put in a box to read one particular text, you were provided with a bunch of texts, some of which provided a perspective on LGBTQ, some of which provided certain, like colonial narratives, that kind of thing. So that I would say that would have definitely made at least a handful of students feel more comfortable knowing that that perspective is at least being touched on a little bit. But that's more of like an individual classroom, case by case basis.

Werner's recollection illustrates the ways in which individual teachers would subtly show allyship through visual and curricular forms of representation in a strategic way to ensure that they were not "pushing an agenda" yet still making themselves visible to LGBTQ+ students. Another student, Skelly, mentioned that his religion teacher discussed LGBTQ+ communities in the Church unprompted during their sex education unit. The teacher mentioned that "Catholic views are changing in the Church." He felt that she "did it through her own will, not through the school's prompting of it." He explains that this was a big moment for him, stating he "felt seen". All three students in this study mentioned that as they transitioned into high school, the overall atmosphere felt more inclusive compared to their middle schools because more teachers were open to having discussions about LGBTQ+ topics, likely because they worked with older students than middle school teachers. Werner got the sense that the beliefs held by staff were not always in line with the larger stance of the school district:

> Despite it being a Catholic school, there was only a handful of the staff that really seemed to be fully against it [2SLGBTQ+] [...]I would say overall the school did a good job. A lot of the general Catholic School District belief on these issues is not represented in the staff. It's kind of just something that's from the higher ups, like from the very top of the hierarchy, that kind of trickles down to encapsulate the rest of the institution, even if the staff themselves don't agree with it.

Werner's observation indicates that students are aware of the exclusionary stances of the school board and the misalignment between the values of some school staff and the values of the school board. In Werner's case, that disconnect was obvious enough that allyship and support from educators could be made visible to students despite the beliefs of the school board.

Student Reflections: Experiences with Peers

All the students in this study mentioned supportive peers and friendships in their schools, yet all three experienced or witnessed homo/transphobic attitudes from students in their school. Werner described a particularly upsetting incident when his school's student council put on a

"White Lie" spirit day[6]. The concept of the day was for students to write a light-hearted white lie about themselves on their shirt. He explains how one student who was "raised in a very traditional and conservative Catholic household" took this opportunity to "push an ideology" by writing "trans women are women" on their T-shirt. He felt that "if it was a racist message or any other kind of discrimination [it] would be met with like disciplinary infraction." He explains that instead:

> Our lovely chaplain, I believe he publicly embraced it in the hallway. I remember hearing he openly supported it and they kind of shared like a little joke about it and then this kid was just allowed to freely walk around the school with this very harmful rhetoric. And they had that as their objective. They had wanted to convey a pretty harmful message just publicly to anybody who might disagree with it in the school, and it was completely enabled. And then I believe that even after staff confronted the principal, it was met with more of a "Oh, but the Catholic Church would agree with that, so we can't really do anything about it" kind-of angle.

The "enabling" of such behavior by some staff was also clear in Skelly's experience, though not as direct.

Skelly discussed his experience in Social Studies class which he described as a "very interactive class" where the teacher would form a circle of desks to encourage debate, including current events about transgender issues. Some of his classmates would share hostile views. I asked him how this made him feel:

> There's times where I've just like, got up and gone to the washroom instead of participating in debates, because, you know [...] I feel like I'm gonna get attacked in some way, directly or indirectly, because people know, like, I've been out since middle school to my peers. So, people know that I'm trans, they know that I'm not straight either [...] it's frustrating and it's a little bit scary to be in those situations, because it's like, I feel like I'm gonna snap, lose my crap on these people because they're saying that I should not have the right to be a person.

Skelly expressed that it "felt unsafe to be in the classroom" around those classmates and described it as "the worst part of high school". He also mentioned that the teacher, whom he liked and respected, never apologized for students' behavior or asked him if he felt safe, stating that "it would have made a huge difference." Such experiences echo the experiences of teachers with negative attitudes: if the adults in the building vocally enabled, or in this case, enabled harmful behavior through silence, students with hostile views were emboldened to share them

[6] Informal school events typically designed by students to show school pride and enthusiasm.

without fear of consequence. The lack of consequences impacted how students responded to harassment. Welch recounted a time that they experienced harassment when representing the GSA at the club fair:

> These boys came in and started calling us like just a whole bunch of slurs [...] it wasn't dealt with immediately, but it was dealt with later and [...] it was a good thing that they [administration] kind of tried to deal with it, but I think because none of us really wanted to say anything. And then once someone did say something, it was dealt with. But I don't think any of the boys actually got in trouble about it.

When asked why Welch and their peers did not want to say anything about the incident, they said that it was the GSA's first time at the club fair, so they didn't want to make a big deal of it. They also mentioned that they "didn't know how the higher ups are going to deal with it." If they reported this to a higher authority, they were concerned that, "are we going to have to continuously basically fight for the fact that no, this did happen? And so, it was easier to just let it kind of let it go." The thought process of Welch and their fellow club members clearly demonstrates an awareness that their teachers, however supportive they may have been, held a limited amount of power in dealing with such instances directly. The fact that Welch also worried about having to prove the legitimacy of their experience to "higher ups", being the school principal, shows a lack of faith that administration would believe their story.

The above student experiences and the lack of administrative disciplinary action was also noticed by teachers, as reinforced by teacher informant Lily, who felt frustrated by the lack of consequences doled out by administration for instances of homophobia and transphobia:

> [...] there's no consequences for students who are directly expressing hate. So, like, I've had in the last two years, maybe two or three students that have actively been hateful, homophobic or transphobic, and when I address it to admin, it's not, there's no consequence. Whereas, if I'm putting up a flag, it's a big issue, or [...] if a student is trying to do anything to represent who they are, it's a bigger issue. There's no apology, there's no parents being called home and explaining your child has done this, like it's just a quick five-minute conversation in the office about how we accept everyone and the dignity of the human spirit.

Previous examples highlighted a disconnect between school staff and the school board. Lily's stance here and Welch's distrust of how "higher ups" would deal with the harassment they experienced, highlighted a further disconnect between teachers and administration, which also extended to students. Despite these negative experiences with peers, all the student informants felt they had some teachers, counsellors, and friends who were supportive, and Welch and

Skelly, who were involved in their school's GSA, believed it was a safe and positive space within a sometimes-antagonistic environment that seemed increasingly hostile towards transgender and nonbinary (TNB) students.

Attitudes towards Gender Nonconformity

In examining the attitudes towards 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity in Catholic schools through the experiences of educator and student participants, a notable finding was that attitudes towards the LGB community seemed more accepting than those towards TNB individuals in Catholic settings. Lily reinforced this by saying that "Catholics are like, okay with like the whole gay thing [...] But as soon as you start bringing pronouns into a conversation or trans or you're talking about, like, what's it called, bottom or top surgery and stuff like that. It's like a huge no." Pronouns and preferred names seemed to be the clearest indicator of a difficulty in fully accepting a TNB student. Jordan said of some of his colleagues who he found to be generally progressive and supportive, "also seem to struggle with pronouns, they always sort of pretend to forget, and like, is it really that hard to remember that what we call this student "they"? When asked what he thought the reason for that was, Jordan stated that some staff who seemed generally inclusive, "don't understand why pronouns are such a big deal to trans and non-binary genderfluid students" and that "the district is not doing anything to explain to them why it's such a big deal", indicating a lack of effort in educating district staff on the topic. He also felt that by "forgetting" to use a preferred pronoun, it was "a nice way of not having to break a rule. You're not going to get a controversy from the socially aware teacher because you just forgot. And then you're not gonna get in trouble from anybody else, because you didn't say it."

While the educators in this study did not struggle with accepting student requests for different pronoun or name usage, the difficulty to do so amongst their colleagues was a common occurrence. Luna brought up teachers struggling with students' preferred names, stating that she could think of "at least four or five teachers" at her previous school that "deliberately would not use those student's names and then make a point of saying that they just didn't understand. It just didn't make sense." This was reflected in Skelly's high school experience, which although it was overall positive, he still encountered intentional deadnaming by some teachers, such as his art teacher:

> She would refuse to call me by my preferred name, and then she said she would be like, okay, that's what it says on the sheet. And I'm like, okay, but I do have permission from the counselors, from the principal, from the vice principal, to be using this name, and then she'd look at me, and she'd go, oh, well, I'm just gonna be safe, because that's what it says on the paper, which frustrated me. And she continuously, after that, used my dead name, and she would, she would call at me in front of the class. And I didn't appreciate that [...] and I could tell it's because I wasn't fitting into her box of exactly what she wanted me to be, right? I was a very nonconforming person, like the way I dress, the way I work, the way I am. And it did seem to strike a chord with her.

Eventually Skelly dropped the art class because of this teacher. Previously, Skelly mentioned his religion teacher trying to be more inclusive of gay relationships in the course content. However, this same teacher would sometimes deadname him, explaining that "on all my work and stuff, it has my preferred name, because that's what I write. And she did call out my dead name while looking at papers that had my preferred name which pissed me off." Skelly felt that this choice to deadname him ultimately came down to "respecting [him] as a person", saying that "if you're not going to use my preferred name, my preferred pronouns, you obviously just don't respect me, right?" The encounters detailed indicate an inability to reconcile one's personal beliefs or lack of understanding with a student's request to go by a different name or pronoun, even though it posed little effort for teachers to do so. Jordan felt gender identity and sexuality were sometimes treated the same by Catholic schools, saying that he had argued about it with the district "up to the very highest level" claiming that "they conflate those things, and they ought not to. I think it helps to actually spread fear of trans people and genderfluid people."

In the Catholic faith, there is no distinction between sex at birth and gender identity, so it is unsurprising that experiences of TNB students might be lumped with LGB students, leading to a lack of understanding around gender nonconformity, possibly resulting in the fear mentioned by Jordan. However, this conflation is also complex, since LGB experiences seemed slightly more tolerated in Catholic schools, as previously mentioned by Lily, whereas TNB issues were met with some hostility. Jordan also alluded to this by saying:

> [...]there's a range of Catholic thought on all issues [...] And then the Church's most recent writing about it is not great either. Like the documents we put out in the last you know five or six years about gender fluidity[7] and things like that. And it's totally hypocritical too, because I've read the document, and you know, it's like if you have a

[7] Jordan's comment is connected to two documents: "Male and Female He Created Them: Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education" (2019): Issued by the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education in 2019, or Declaration *Dignitas Infinita: On Human Dignity* (2024). Both documents are explained in Chapter 4.

> child who's born intersex[8], you must get them to the surgeon as soon as possible. But then you have a very, a similar, you know, medical intervention, you know, made as requested by, a free adult, is, you know, the darkest sin against God and identity.

These statements by Jordan point to Church doctrine that openly condemns gender fluidity and gender reassignment and does not conflate it with the experiences of LGB people. The lack of understanding and condemnation of TNB issues may also point to a societal issue, rather than just a religious one, as rights and acceptance of LGB people is more common. Nonetheless, both LGB and TNB individuals challenge the heteronormative standards of sexuality that the Church deems as being part of God's plan, and so neither are fully accepted in the Catholic faith. As a result, Catholic schools are not going out of their way to differentiate between LGB and TNB experiences, as stated by Jordan, resulting in fear and/or lack of understanding towards pronouns and preferred names.

Enforcing "Policy"

When asked about their awareness of formal and informal policies regarding gender and sexuality, many informants realized they did not know of many official policies, yet they did have an awareness of what was or was not permissible. This lack of written policy became one of the most prevalent and reoccurring findings in this study. Jordan, a high school teacher, compared the lack of written policy to George Orwell's novel, 1984[9]:

> I think that's willful like in *1984*. They [Orwell] talk about how, you know, there were no written laws, but there's like a million laws just arbitrarily enforced right? And I think like, if you have people that have a general sense of "don't do that", and if you're a fairly conservative organization, then that general sense is maybe more helpful than if you have a lot written down. And also, anything that's written down is also susceptible to, you know, the media and so on [...]And also, you know, they're [the school board] interested in people liking what the school board is doing right? So, I think there's like, a variety of reasons that not a lot is written down.

The lack of concrete policy resulted in an avoidance of 2SLGBTQ+ topics by some teachers, as noticed by Werner when he was a student. When asked if he was aware of any formal policies regarding 2SLGBTQ+ topics in his school, Werner could not recall any.

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[8] The Catholic Church holds that every person is intrinsically male or female, viewing the concept of intersex as challenging traditional sex distinctions while still relying on the binary it seeks to reject (Vatican City, 2019). The Vatican's *Dignitas Infinita (2024*) states "any sex-change intervention, as a rule, risks threatening the unique dignity the person has received from the moment of conception." However, people with genital abnormalities (such as intersex) may seek medical help to address them, but such procedures are not considered sex changes in this context.

[9] *1984* is a cautionary tale about totalitarianism. It was written in 1949 during the Cold War.

However, he did reflect on his high school religion class where he felt the teacher glossed over such discussions:

> She [the teacher] would kind of propose like an ethical issue that the church has, but then kind of redact it by immediately saying, well, not redact, but kind of like preface it by saying this is the Church's stance, but Catholic individuals are not able to judge others and so they should still, like, have their right to do XYZ. So, I think that's what it was with gay marriage. Other things like gender expression were never covered. And even like, gay marriage was very briefly just kind of glossed over. Yeah, I wouldn't say any like, real strict policies. And again, it was a topic that was, it seemed more like they were just trying to avoid it because with generally conservative institutions they take an approach, I would say, more of denial and ignorance than actually confronting the issue.

Joan, a high school teacher, made the connection between Jordan's sentiment that rules are "arbitrarily enforced" and Werner's assessment that confrontation with 2SLGBTQ+ topics is deliberately avoided:

> I find there's less written policy and it's a lot of like spoken, where they [school officials] just try and subtly let you know what you should or shouldn't do, so it's like the nudging or directing or just full slowing down of what you want to do. So yeah, I've had many just like conversations and every time I have requested confirmation in writing or anything like that it usually doesn't happen or it's not the answer that you are looking for.

The circumventing of the school board whenever Joan has tried to request policy in writing indicates an indirect acknowledgement that policy cannot be distributed through writing, though it was never expressed why that is the case. Teachers seeking written policy were never given reasoning for its absence, rather, just deliberate avoidance. However, when it came to the establishment and functioning of GSAs, attempts at more uniform, but still unwritten, policies came into effect amongst participant experiences.

Gay-Straight Alliances

All the educators in this study presently or previously (if their role was no longer currently in a school) worked at a school with a GSA, except for Clay, the only middle school teacher in the study. Two educators, Jules and Jordan, reflected on a time when there was more vocal public support for GSAs in schools under Alberta's New Democratic Paty (NDP), the governing party prior to the current UCP. The NDP government enacted Bill 24 which amended the Education Act to require principals to grant the request for a GSA immediately and ensured that club names could include terms like "gay" or "queer" without discouragement or prohibition, even if the school was Catholic. Having an awareness of this very public

government support gave teachers more confidence in advocating for students. Jules explained that when the NDP came into power:

> There was a good education minister at the time that said that GSAs belong in all schools and if students request them, they must be started. [...] I felt, at the time, supported in that because of what the Education Minister said, I think he had an open letter to all Alberta students saying, if you're feeling discriminated against within your school, I want you to reach out to me directly, and so I would always go back to that. So, you know our Education Minister like has, and I don't know if this is true, but has the power to, like, take away our position as a Catholic school board if it's not respecting the human rights of students. So, I felt really strongly emboldened by that.

Clearly, the directive of a provincial government that prioritized 2SLGBTQ+ rights carried more authority than that of the school board for educators like Jules, providing them with confidence in supporting students. The NDP's policies around GSAs was successful in Catholic schools as evidenced by the fact that nine out of ten educators in this study had a GSA at their school. Eventually, the UCP government passed Bill 8, The Education Amendment Act, which removed the requirement that principals shall not prohibit or discourage the use of the words "queer" or "gay", but that a name shall be chosen in consultation with the principal. It was clear that for the schools in this study, a Catholic angle was imposed through the naming of clubs. Of all the informants in this study, not one had a GSA/QSA at their school that went by the official name[10], "Queer Straight Alliance" or "Gay Straight Alliance". All the club names referred to some sort of euphemism for a spectrum of diversity and inclusivity or referred to a Catholic value. Two of the student informants, Werner and Welch, felt that this was censorship of 2SLGBTQ+ visibility.

The process of forming a GSA in a Catholic school revealed school board attempts at more formalized procedures. Clay, the only teacher in this study whose school did not have an "official" GSA, experienced an onerous process when a student asked him and a colleague for a GSA at his school a few years ago. He and his colleague went to their principal to ask for direction, and she reached out to a school board official "who at the time was responsible for sort of overseeing the formation of GSAs or QSAs at that time". Clay and his colleague met with this official who explained to them what needed to happen:

> I didn't know that students have to actually go to the principal and request it, you can't go to the teacher. I didn't know that you have to have multiple teachers involved, and then those teachers should be selected by the principal. So just because those students have

[10] None of the club names are listed here to protect the identities of informants.

> asked me and this other teacher, didn't mean that we were allowed to be involved. It was under the discretion of the principal, because they had to first of all, determine whether or not the teacher had a personal stake in this because of past experiences. They didn't want anyone that feels a certain way about being part of a club that could disrupt policies and procedures within the Catholic school board. Thankfully, we were invited to have a part in supporting those students. In the end, did we end up with a GSA? No, no it wasn't approved. The value of it wasn't approved by the powers that be, by [the official], by our principal, at the time. In the end, it just sort of became, every Wednesday, we're going to play cards, and we got together, and we played cards.

When I asked Clay why their request for a GSA was not approved, he said he had no idea, and that it was never explained to them, though based on this explanation, the school board may have felt that the club would "disrupt policies and procedures" or that Clay and the other teacher "had a personal stake" in forming the club. Regardless, Clay and his students simply had to accept the appeasement of being allowed to meet, but not with the intention of advocating for 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity. Jules echoed a similar process when he explained how he started a GSA at his previous high school with a colleague. They also met with a school board official who had a religious role:

> I think the rules were that you were supposed to have a lesson plan for each time you've met with this group. And it had to be vetted, and you're supposed to have administrative meetings, and if you're going to start some kind of a campaign, it had to go through your name, and it had to go through the religious side of consulting, so there felt like there was a lot of control that they wanted to exert over us.

Although Jules was successful in establishing the GSA at the school, running this club came with several strings attached including a lack of freedom and seemingly, trust in him as a professional to organize activities for students. The process of vetting and administrative meetings indicates a commitment to surveillance of teachers and students by the school board to ensure that club activities did not veer too far from a Catholic lens.

In permitting GSAs, it was clear through some experiences that a certain level of surveillance was enacted on those teachers in charge of the clubs. Jordan said his GSA had to "[...] send our plans downtown sometimes" which he was unfair, stating that it was not as if "the chess club or you know, the football club has to send their proposed plans to the bishop to make sure they're ethical." Jordan also mentioned that district officials were emailing Jordan's principal behind his back, being told to "make sure that they [the GSA] don't talk about gender theory", which he saw mistakenly when his principal accidentally included him on an email: "So

not only was I needing to be told, you know, what sorts of things were OK to do, and what sort of things to avoid directly, my principal was also being given advice how to surveil me." The surveillance of Jordan indicates a distinct lack of trust in educators by those in positions of authority to make autonomous decisions in the best interest of their students without violating Catholic principles. To ensure Catholic values and norms around gender and sexuality are enforced, Catholic school boards carry out their expectations through a chain of command (school board officials to principals) and through the manipulation of teachers. This manipulation is expressed through the appeasement of teachers attempting greater visibility for their GSAs. For instance, as GSAs began to gain more popularity in Jordan's school district a few years ago, his board would begin hosting meetings under the guise of cooperation:

> [...] they called it breaking bread, where they mostly remind you of what the policies are. Every now and then they like throw a bone, like a mental health resource that doesn't have anything to do with the queer community, but it's generally them telling us what we can and can't do and what we can and can't say. So, it isn't really a discussion forum or up for debate. And I think at some point there was a promise that there'd be like some [...] joint activities, but that's never happened. So, it's mostly just sort of more like indoctrination, I guess.

This false cooperation by Jordan's school board gives teachers hope that may attain resources and opportunities for collaboration but ultimately serves the board's purpose of reinforcing Catholic norms and values.

Several of the teacher informants detailed the obstacles they had to navigate, and the level of persistence needed on their part to plan activities for GSAs. Joan explained the difficulties she faced trying to attain board-approved resources after her own kept getting constantly rejected by a superintendent:

> So, then I just emailed them [the superintendent] asking like, can you provide us with information? Can you provide us with something that we can talk about because the students are asking for it and then it was probably like a year and a half of us asking, and then finally it was through email that they were like, we are going to come to your school and have a meeting and then we will talk about it [...] And then in a meeting it was like no, we're never going to give you these resources. [...] after a phase of like [the board] speaking with the bishop it was like, we will not be providing you with any resources, they're not coming.

Waiting long periods for resources or responses from school officials was a pattern amongst teacher advocates. Evey, a high school teacher who leads student council, experienced similar

evasion when she kept trying to email school board officials about approval for LGBTQ+ advocacy through her school's social media. She felt that the school board seemed "nervous" because they were initially communicating through email, and they also did not want to meet through Google Meet, assuming due to fear that she would record the meeting. She offered to meet in person:

> I said great, I would love to come and meet with you in person. And it took a while because at first, they were like, well, we're pretty busy. I don't know if we have time and then it was like, OK, we'll meet with you during exam break, like in June, and I'm like, that's too late. The students are in our building right now. And I just refused to stop emailing.

Eventually, school board officials agreed to meet with Evey in May. She described their surprise at her level of preparedness:

> I don't think they were prepared for me to be as prepared for the meeting as I was, arriving with like, you know, faith-based documents, human rights like, you know, like information about all of these things. And they were like, literally, there was a point where the superintendent was like, "Wow, I didn't, you're really prepared for this, which at the time an administrator who had come with me and was very much on my side was like, of course she's prepared. This is what she does. This is her role. She's a teacher who cares about her kids [...] He was quite upset about that comment.

Ultimately, Evey described that although she was "really trying to go to bat for our students and these celebrations" she was only allowed to create a social media post "that says you are loved and there could be no rainbows, there could be no like reference to pride." Since then, Evey's students had made some progress with small celebrations, but they are "very limited and they still are really hesitant to let us, [...] we cannot use the word pride, and that has been like very, very firmly stated to me on all of my social media posts." If student council wants to show 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy, they must first "be approved by principals and superintendents, pretty much only in the month of June." Preparation of materials and waiting for the school board's approval also extended to students. Lily explained that the GSA at her school requested an activity where students would paint the sidewalk in front of the school in pride colors, and her administration required the students to advocate to the school board:

> The admin had us write a proposal as a club to see if we could do this. So, that proposal would be sent to downtown for approval, and if downtown approved it, then we would be allowed to do something as simple as painting the sidewalk with washable paint [...] the excuse that we were given was [...] we were allowed to do it, but only using chalk, and we weren't allowed to do it on school property. It had to be on the sidewalk in front of the

> school. And the reason being is [...] because they didn't want any vandalism by other students, could potentially bully and whatnot. And part of what the kids came back and said was like, well, that's the whole point of why we want to do this so that it's more visible and so people become more informed and aware and educated. Yeah, you're always gonna have people that vandalize something that disagree, but like, at the end of the day, this is what makes us feel good or feel seen.

The process of constant emailing, attending meetings, and preparing documents on faith and human rights like Evey did, is a laborious undertaking for these teachers and their students, as was the case at Lily's school where the onus to make a case for an activity was placed on them. In all these cases, despite the thorough preparation, the requests did not result in the desired outcome. The surprise at Evey's thorough preparation in combination with delayed meetings, suggests the school board places prioritizes little priority on 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion and lacks the intention to follow through. For the students at Lily's school, the need to compromise the location of the painted flag, assuming students will vandalize it on school property, feels like a strategic concession — if the flag was painted across the street, then the school board wouldn't have to claim any association with it. In general, the participants did not have much success with having their ideas approved; often being outright denied or given token approval, despite careful planning and consideration of Catholic values.

This rejection of activities to foster visible 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity in schools had implications for students. Educators mentioned students being aware of their ideas being shut down, and the consequent disappointment. When Clay's attempt to start a GSA at his middle school was denied, he described the reactions of his students:

> Oh, they were pissed off. They were really angry. This is what they wanted to feel safer in the school and they were denied that. It hurt their hearts. It hurt our hearts. So in the end, all they really wanted was just a space for them to be comfortable with each other and have that adult support there and we gave it to them, but we gave it to them in the guise of we are going to have a club, but it wasn't like, a visible support and that was what made them upset because what they wanted to do was to also bring awareness to it. They wanted to have presentations; they wanted to have speakers. They wanted to make themselves visible and they were denied.

Teachers like Clay are placed in a difficult situation in that they experience frustration themselves at the rejection of their initiatives and then must be the ones to communicate these decisions to their students. Similarly, after Joan's GSA had had their request to put up posters rejected, she explains the students "were quite hurt. They thought it was like all the things you

think, right? Like, they're just like, this is just Catholicism, this is homophobic, this is why it's unsafe, that kind of stuff." In some cases, the student response went further into complete disengagement, discouraging students from wanting to be involved in their GSA. In a previous example, Lily mentioned that the GSA at her school wanted to create a pride flag on the schools' sidewalk, and the school district required it be moved off school property. In response, her students rejected the idea, and the sidewalk painting was never created because the students felt "shut down". She explained that after the proposal came back to the club with those conditions, "less and less numbers came to the club. So, by the end of the school year last year, the GSA had maybe two members." All of these examples indicate that students had an awareness of their school boards' stances towards 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity; they did not blame their individual teachers for these outcomes but rather made an association between the school board and religious homophobia, choosing to withdraw as a result of feeling defeated, rather than continuing to push for approval.

Due to such situations, many teachers felt protective of their 2SLGBTQ+ students, wanting to shelter them from the rejection of the school board. Joan for example, adjusted her expectations and tactics:

> After the first time when it [...] turned to yes and then turned to no right after [regarding posters], I kind of set a standard for myself. I was never going to bring anything back to the kids until I 100% have it like either in writing or it was already confirmed that we could do whatever it was that we were planning on doing. So, as far as trying to control the impact that a lot of the politics has on the group, I think I was able to kind of like shield the club a lot. And it just came from like straight conversations of just being like, saying I will not take this back to my club until I know a definite, because we don't want to do extra harm, so I won't even bring up the fact that this might even be a possibility unless I know it's 110% actually going to happen. Because the damage is done once they think something's going to be given to them and like the idea's there and you take it away. After the first time that happened, I was like, OK, we're never gonna do that again.

Since part of a GSA's purpose is to provide students with support and foster well-being, it felt counter-intuitive to educators to expose students to school board disapproval for activities whose only purpose was to encourage inclusivity. The effects of rejecting a teacher request had a trickle-down effect that extended far beyond meetings between teacher and school board officials; the impacts often countered the purpose of a GSA, and ultimately, school board officials were not held responsible for the how these actions impacted students, placing the burden on individual teachers to console students.

"Safe Space" Posters, Flags, and Sharing of Pronouns

There were three other key examples, referenced by more than one teacher participant, in which attempts at formalized directives were enforced by school boards, distributed through principals (not through writing). This was evidenced though the removal of "safe space" posters, policies over pride flags, and the sharing of pronouns in teachers' email signatures, and by external organizations in partnerships with schools. These examples were frequent enough that they were a clear indication of a directive although they did not appear in a written format for teachers to reference.

The ATA (Alberta Teacher's Association[11]) created "safe space" posters and stickers which were provided to all schools in Alberta. Clay, Jules, and Evey all recalled their school boards requesting teachers take them down, communicated through email to principals. Even when there did appear to be formal requests from the school boards, these requests seemed to be at the discretion of principles, such as in Clay's case, where his administration did not enforce the take down of posters. In other schools, like Evey's, a staff meeting was held, where staff were "strongly encouraged" to remove pride flags and the ATA safe space stickers. Jules refused to take his ATA Safe Space poster down. He found it one day "taken down and folded up and put on the [his] desk", the same day a school board official was visiting the school for a meeting. After the media reported that some Catholic school districts in Alberta were banning the posters (Wearmouth, 2023; Zielinski, 2024), some school boards responded by creating their own, Jules explained:

> We were asked to replace those posters with district created resources. So, the district made their own versions of safe space posters, which conveniently, you know, ignored anything LGBTQ. The first version they made said, we were all created in God's image and love equally, or something like that [...] and they made, the most recent one [...] it actually does mention gender and sexuality as being one of the like, regardless of, we support all students, regardless of gender, sexuality, etc.

Similarly, some teachers in this study encountered opposition when trying to display pride flags. All the educators and students in the study stated that although none of their schools publicly displayed any sort of 2SLGBTQ+ resources, students could often figure out which teachers were "safe" due to pride flags and stickers in individual classrooms. Some participants

[11] The Alberta Teacher's Association is the province's teacher union, mentioned in Chapter 4.

like Jordan, Clay, and Jules displayed pride symbols without issue. Others like Lily were met with disapproval. Lily explained that at the beginning of the school year, the superintendent came and hosted a question-and-answer session with staff, and a colleague asked if teachers were allowed to have pride flags in their rooms. Lily said that "the answer wasn't a direct no, but he implied that only in the event that a student asks or requests the flag to be put up are we allowed to put up the flag." She felt that this went against "the whole idea of allowing our students to feel seen, heard, represented." In response, she sought out a queer student who she knew attended GSA, asking them to request it. The student's response was that "they were shocked. They thought it was stupid that they would even have to ask me." This interaction with the student demonstrates a sense of allyship in which LGBTQ+ students and allied teachers work together against the policies of the school district. Lily was not able to find any written policy for her school district about pride flags or rainbows, therefore she felt this directive by the superintendent was a way to circumnavigate the issue; saying "it's not realistic to think that, especially the students who might not be out, to come up and request something like that."

The other common occurrence of school districts trying to enforce more formal policy was regarding pronouns usage in email signatures. Several educators included their personal pronouns in their email signatures and were asked to remove them under the guise of "district branding". Jules explained that:

> [...] the district said they wanted everyone using the same format for their email signature, [...] and they told principals to send that out to their teachers and say, you must use this email signature, because we want it to be a district branding or something like that.

Jules used this format for his email signature and included his pronouns next to his name, resulting in his principal calling him in for a meeting. He explained that the principals were told to have a one-on-one conversation with any staff that did not "use district format" rather than addressing the pronouns directly, which he described as "circumnavigating". He detailed his interaction with his principal:

> I told the principal [...] it's very important to me that I keep the pronouns on my email signature, and it is something that I am willing to risk my job over. And I said it very politely. I said, no disrespect to you. I'm not trying to be defiant here, but this is something I feel very strongly about. I do actually feel like it's a life-or-death thing. I think the district is playing with kids' mental health and with their lives by trying to erase trans existence in our district, and it means enough to me that a student sees my pronouns

> that I would be willing to get fired. That principal's response was, oh, yeah, of course, I've just been told to talk to you about it, and I'm not going to enforce it, as long as we've had this conversation, then you continue to make your decisions as a professional.

Joan was also asked by her principal to remove her pronouns from her email signature several times in the year, which she refused to do. Eventually, this resulted in a meeting with "downtown"[12] where she was told that having pronouns on her signature was harmful to students. I asked her to elaborate on what school board officials meant by this:

> So, they [the school board] created a [research] group within the [school] system, and they found that it was causing harm to kids. I did ask for their resources, like I would be really interested, as like, all of the research I've done is opposite. So, if there's research out there that I'm not aware of like could you send it right up because I'd love to hear it, because I'm not here to do anything that hurts kids. So, if you have that information, just send it my way, and I never got it. But it was very much along the lines of like that argument, that's like, you are initiating something, and I think they're trying to combat that and again, I see it as like they're trying to scare me or manipulate me into getting rid of it [the pronouns] because it's truly not about the kids. And I think that they [the school board] run off the fear of like, we're a Catholic system, and if we do this, we're maybe less Catholic and then we might lose our Catholicism or whatever, and their funding or whatever it is.

Joan also mentioned that she confronted her principal about the lack of written policy dictating use of pronouns on email signature, stating that "if there is a policy, I will follow policy. If you say this is policy and it's visible and the public can see it, once that's there, I'll revisit having my pronouns on there." In response, her principal claimed that he had the authority to put such a directive in writing via email and send it to Joan, which she would have accepted. She never received this email, explaining, "I think he went back and took it to the board, and they were like absolutely do not put that in writing." Ultimately, Joan had to meet with school board officials again, where she also asked about written policy. In response, the school board explained that they avoided written policy because "once there's a policy, it ties your hands." Joan felt they were already trying to tie her hands:

> I was saying like, you're already doing that, you want to force me to do it. And if you have a policy it's going to actually force me to do it. So, it's a way of like, again, scaring teachers into doing it. And so, they never actually have to write a policy on it because they know it won't fly.

[12] "downtown" refers to school district head offices.

Joan was adamant about not removing her pronouns from her email signature unless written policy was provided. She felt that the board knew "it won't fly" because she had knowledge of provincial and federal human rights protections which protect individuals from discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression. Based on her experience, their only way of trying to enforce rules around pronouns in emails was through tactics such as supposed "research" about harm to students. Joan's consciousness fueled her refusal to give into these maneuvers, and she never removed her pronouns from her signature.

At the time of these interviews, Alberta's legislation regarding student pronoun use had not yet been passed, so neither the government nor school boards had any official policies in writing regarding sharing student or teacher pronouns. However, that did not keep Clay's school board from enforcing consequences for their use. Clay recalls a situation where an external bike club organization, which would come to his middle school annually, was asked to cut their ties with his school district because they had started their sessions by asking students to share their names and pronouns:

> [A] teacher complained about the kids sharing their pronouns. It escalated. The district reached out to the organization to request that kids refrain from sharing pronouns. The organization said no. The district then told them that they were no longer welcome in our schools otherwise. Thus, the end of free bikes for kids.

In this situation, Clay said that the bike club refused to comply with the board's mandate, and no replacement was found for the program. Consequently, a partnership with external organizations that benefitted the well-being of students at this school was severed over the optional sharing of pronouns emphasizing the boards' prioritization of religious permeation in all areas of school life over opportunities for students.

Inconsistency amongst Administrators

The final finding in relation to the first research question, was the ability of school administrators to further hinder or support teachers and students in their resistance. School administrators (principals and vice principals) served as the bridge between the school board and teachers and therefore could have substantial influence in shaping 2SLGBTQ+ support and visibility directly in their school based on how they chose to respond to the orders of the school district. Principals seemed to follow and disseminate board directives based on their own discretion which resulted in highly inconsistent support across schools. Schools with supportive

administrators had GSAs that were more visible and actively involved in advocacy than those with more resistant principles, which resulted in clubs that simply served as spaces for students to hang out. Jules discussed his current supportive staff and administration:

> This admin allows, trusts, the teachers to be doing what's best for the students, and they give a lot of autonomy to the students who run the club. They decide what happens in the meetings. It's completely student driven and possibly like teacher facilitated and organized. You know, sometimes they have ideas and don't know how to organize them so teachers will help with that. Like this sweatshirt we had made this year, there were no issues with getting this made, just a student designed the logo, emailed it to the principal, they said, those are great. We put an order in for students and staff. A lot of staff ordered it, so the general feel is inclusiveness in the building.

Jordan has also had positive experiences with various administrators in his school, though, like Jules, he "always felt like I needed to run it by admin you know, make sure I wasn't, you know, fired for doing it or get in trouble or students get in trouble." He successfully had bake sales and slide shows for Trans Day of Visibility approved. He said he hadn't been told "no" very often, but at times, his administration would need to "send it up the chain." He explained that "in total fairness, a lot of the things that we sent up the chain were like, approved too, but then, there is a sense of why would you send something up the chain that wouldn't be approved, right?" Jordan emphasized that there was a process "of the things you're thinking of doing before you actually even suggest something" implying that it was unlikely that he would ask his principal for something that he did not feel would be approved by the school or by higher authorities. Although he had experiences with supportive school administration, a lot of this was in part due to him carefully selecting and planning the activities he would submit, showing an awareness of his administration's stance on 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity.

Jules and Jordan worked at alternative high schools that either cater to older students or those with learning needs that are not easily supported by traditional mainstream programs. Both mentioned this as promoting a more inclusive student population, which was reflected in their staff and administration. Lily and Luna worked in traditional high schools and had more varied experiences with administrators. Luna explained although she has had some past administrators who are "more willing" to support 2SLGBTQ+ visibility, most of her experiences, including those with her current principal, are not supportive and are "older, straight, white men who are, like, firm in their religion". Similarly, Lily mentioned that "some leaders are more open to it than others, and so you kind of go with the vibe that your administrator has." She experienced

administrators who are “very supportive of it and have no problem with flags or representation in any sort of way” and she has also experienced the opposite this year where “it's not tolerated at all, so things like [sharing] pronouns are not being accepted for us as teachers to use.” As an example, Lily received an email from a parent this year about a student in her homeroom regarding information about their child’s transition, their pronouns, and mental health concerns. She stated, “that parent was trying to make it very clear to us that we need to practice using the pronouns with the student, because it affects their anxiety, their mental health [...] and then the administrator was very direct in that we are not to use the student’s preferred pronouns. We are to address the student by their name only.” The stance of Lily’s principal comes across as confusing; Catholic education prioritizes respecting the authority of the parent (CCCB, 2011), so the decision to against the parents’ wishes seems a result of disagreement with the parents’ choice to respect their child’s preferred pronoun based on personal or religious beliefs.

Amongst teachers, there was an impression that although some principals harbored religious and discriminatory attitudes, many were committed to following school board directives, perhaps more so if their own beliefs were reflected in them. Lily explained that the superintendent of the board visited her school and spoke to teachers about teaching about gender and sexuality saying that “it's not your job to teach about these issues. It's your job to teach the curriculum through a Catholic lens.” Later that year, she had requested LGBTQ+ resources for her personal reference from the union representative at her school, and when her principal gained knowledge of the resources being held in her classroom, he “walked into my room and he told me that I was to remove that resource from my classroom, that he had the right to confiscate it, and that I was not there to teach students about anything to do with gender or sexuality. I was there to teach them a curriculum.” Lily felt that her principals' actions were linked to the mandates of the district, that “it must be something that’s trickling down.” Joan also thought this of her administration, describing them as “scared” and “bow[ing] to the glass tower”, saying “my administrator right now is just like in fear of not doing whatever the top wants them to do.” Lily and Joan’s perception of their administrators' actions conveys an awareness that some administrators choose to take school board directives very seriously, and others follow directives based on their personal beliefs.

Student participants demonstrated an understanding that principals' support of gender and sexual minorities influenced the level of visibility and advocacy in a school. Two student informants, Skelly and Welch, had positive and negative interactions with administration which shaped their experiences. Welch compares two principals they had in high school. The first served as their principal during the first two years of their high school experience:

> Our first principal was really good about [...] like actually advocating for us. And then it felt like our second principal, [...] he was more advocating for the school board and not for the students. And so, it felt like, some of the things that we wanted to do, we couldn't do. The first principal came in and talked to us after like, an incident happened. He came in and he was like, OK, I actually want to learn like your experience and what this is. He actively was doing things to learn, and I think that was a good step.

Their second principal took over when Welch was in grade twelve:

> [...] the other principal, he was invited to come in and talk to us and I don't think he ever really did. And so, I don't know, it just felt like the progress that we did make in the two years when [first principal] was there, it was good. But then, [second principal] came in, it was, some of that stuff that we actually worked towards, got piled away. So that's what I mean, it [2SLGBTQ+] was celebrated a little bit, but then it kind of was backtracked.

Under their first principal, Welch felt that the GSA was more welcome and even encouraged in their activities. The regression felt under the second principal was a result of requiring more approval for activities, and less action taken in instances of bullying, which under the first principal, was addressed through a club meeting he attended of his own accord.

Perhaps the most poignant example of administrations' power in forming student experiences comes from Skelly, a trans student informant. Skelly was outed by his middle school to his parents:

> All of my teachers, they had been using my preferred name. And I came up to the counselor as well, and I told the counselor, hey, I'm not in a good home situation —He knew this like, for years, that I wasn't in a good situation— please don't tell my mom I'm using this at school. It could end up making things way worse at home, it could end up putting my life in danger. And instead of listening to me, either him or one of the principals called my mom and told. So, my mom told everybody to stop using my preferred name and pronouns at school, and it just, you know, it hurts so bad, because I loved these teachers a lot and I respected them. And I lost pretty much all of my respect when they decided they can't use that for me, that would just make me comfortable to be in school, you know?

In high school however, it was his administrator's initiative that helped him feel safe at school and at home again:

> I went to talk to the counselor, and within that day, emails were sent to all of my teachers [by the principal] being like, hey, this is the name, use these pronouns. Don't tell his mom if you're corresponding with his mom, use that [dead] name, like it was great. It was such an easy thing. And most of my teachers within a day they were transferring to my preferred pronouns. And it was actually really amazing that, you know, I didn't have to, like, fight so hard for something that should be a right for everyone. [...] And every semester, he would send out like a new email to all of my new teachers and be like, okay, same thing, name, pronouns, if you're talking with his mom, and, you know, it kept me safe at home, and it kept me comfortable at school, and it actually made me want to be at school, you know, like, I've always had a problem with being at school until high school, but it felt like a place where I could be safe. And it was actually an escape from home [...] It got to the point where I stopped, like, absolutely dreading going into every single class. And, you know, I feel like my teachers saw a change too like I'm a much brighter person, and I feel like if I didn't have that support from the administration and the teachers, then I wouldn't be half the person I am today. Because, you know, that really made me comfortable with being up front with people about who I am, it made me realize that people can accept you, even if, like someone else doesn't want them to.

In Skelly's situation, the principal prioritized his safety and was able to use their power to enforce a directive to all his teachers. This had far-reaching impacts; not only did Skelly feel safer and respected, but it also positively influenced his ability to learn and participate in school, teaching him valuable lessons about acceptance that he appreciated past graduation. These impacts are especially apparent when contrasted to his experiences in middle school which shattered his trust in the adults he depended on to keep him safe.

Because administrative support could be so inconsistent, it was noticed by both teacher and student informants that advocacy had to fall on the shoulders of individual teachers and was at times limited to their classroom and club space. Therefore, if individual teachers did not take the initiative, and without collective school staff efforts to ensure 2SLGBTQ+ visibility, advocacy became less apparent, if at all. This was the case at Lily's school:

> So, we had a really good GSA a few years ago. Since then, the teacher in charge, this has to do a lot with like, everything that's on our plates, but they meet once a week at lunchtime, and activities, as far as like, school-wide activities, I haven't seen much of a presence. I didn't even see them at club fair this year [...] I haven't seen any promotion of it in the halls [...]I had the one student that I actually tried to connect with the GSA at our school, but they came back and they were like, there's not anything really going on in that club, kind of eating lunch and hanging out [...] It's not anything where they're doing like activism work or any sort of like, let's try to build community or have any visibility[...] you have to have someone [a teacher] in there that's like, that's their work, and passion and drive, and we just don't have that right now.

Lily's explanation highlights an important point: a less visibly active GSA is not necessarily a measure of a teachers' level of care for their 2SLGBTQ+ students but can be a result of how much wok teachers have on their plates. To have a visible and outspoken GSA, extensive labor and commitment is required by teacher-leads, as evidenced by previous examples of several educators. If a school did not have administrative support and additionally, the absence of an individually committed teacher willing to take on the work of advocating for LGBTQ+ students, the work fell solely onto students. Adan, who used to work in a Catholic school, described a situation that was the catalyst for his leaving the Catholic school board:

> In my last year we had a 100-signature document from our student body outlining all of the transphobic, homophobic, xenophobic remarks with dates, names, places of people. In our school. That was sent to our admin team and our trustee about how awful they felt going to our school.
>
> Adela: And what was the response to that?
>
> Adan: That'd be great to know. And this is why I left. to my knowledge, there wasn't really a response. Any response that I was privy to was underwhelming and mostly tried to brush away any issues.

This is a prime example of students' investing effort into a large-scale initiative that had no uptake from administrators and board officials, signifying the need for allied teachers and administrators, otherwise, such issues risk becoming invisible. To conclude, in order to support GSAs and 2SLGBTQ+ students, the onus is placed on the teachers and students to take the time and fight for recognition, yet, when small attempts at visibility are trade, or large attempts at protest like in Adan's example, school boards subdue them with concessions or do not respond all together.

Summary of Findings: Research Question 1

The first half of the study's findings focused on answering the research question: What factors hinder or contribute to teacher/student resistance to divisive homo/transphobic rhetoric in the face of institutional repression? The educators and recent graduates in this study faced significant barriers to advocacy and visibility in Alberta's Catholic schools. Firstly, all the informants were knowledgeable about Catholic doctrine surrounding gender and sexuality. This doctrine permeated their schools, influencing attitudes of peers and staff, and hindering educator's ability to provide visible support whether that be in the form of posters, stickers, establishing GSAs, or running 2SLGBTQ+ events. However, because many informants used

their awareness of Catholic beliefs to their advantage to argue for acceptance of marginalized students, they found ways around barriers and created pockets of safety and opportunities for their students. Attitudes toward discussions of gender and sexuality were generally positive, but participants still detailed several experiences of homophobia and transphobia. The vocality of peer attitudes was influenced by the degree of inclusivity in school cultures.

Another important finding was the lack of written policy. School boards attempted to enforce uniform procedures through meetings surrounding pronoun sharing, ATA safe space posters/ stickers, GSA establishment, and approval requirements for 2SLGBTQ+ activities. While the lack of formal documentation sometimes caused frustration for many educators, it also worked to their advantage. The educators in this study were very aware of the fact that their school districts could not put policies against pronouns usage or GSA activities in writing or else they could risk unwanted negative media attention or accusations of human rights violations. This allowed educators to push boundaries and persistently advocate for resources or refuse to follow some directives. However, the lack of written policy also created inconsistencies in enforcement across schools, and therefore uneven support for 2SLGBTQ+ initiatives. As a result, the burden of supporting 2SLGBTQ+ students and initiatives fell on individual teachers rather than collective school efforts.

The findings of this chapter lay the groundwork for the discussions surrounding Alberta's new legislation, Bill 27, and its impacts on the safe spaces in Catholic schools. This legislation adds another layer to the institutional repression already encountered in these schools; the factors here that aided or hindered student and teacher resistance continue to play a significant role in how publicly funded Catholic schools respond to divisive provincial legislation.

Chapter 6:
Legislation and Safe Spaces: Findings

In December 2024, Alberta's United Conservative Party (UCP) enacted legislation through three bills, which enforce restrictions for gender-affirming care, transgender participation in women's sports, an "opt-in" system for school programs that deal with human sexuality, and parental consent for students' change of pronouns. This study focuses on the portion of legislation titled Bill 27, the Education Amendment Act, which requires teachers to notify parents if a student aged 16 or 17 wants to use a different pronoun or name and requires consent for students aged 15 and under. This policy is the basis of the second research question, the findings of which are discussed in this chapter: How are safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ Students in publicly funded Catholic schools shaped by recent provincial legislation in Alberta?

The term 'safe spaces' can refer to specific spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ students such as GSAs but also encompasses the school setting as a whole or individual classrooms. Many participants felt that the legislation was a part of a larger societal shift in intolerance for diverse gender and sexual identities that they could sense in the atmosphere of their schools. The fact that participants brought up this cultural shift seemed to point to its role as an organizing factor of parental rights' legislation. In response to the legislation specifically, participants expressed concern over student autonomy and mental health, yet they showed a desire to resist exclusionary practices and policy, expressing more determination to create safer spaces in their schools. This chapter organizes teacher and student responses to the second research question around cultural shift in attitudes, initial reactions to Bill 27, policy implications and concerns, including concerns for the Catholic context, and lastly, examines resistance and refusal to follow provincial policy.

Cultural Shifts

All the informants noticed a shift in intolerant attitudes in their schools and within society at large towards 2SLGBTQ+ identities. The educator informants had all worked in their districts for several years prior to the UCP government and had encountered religious discrimination towards gender and sexuality in their schools before, yet they all pointed to a significant cultural change that felt increasingly less accepting of diverse sexual and especially gender identities. Luna explained that the cultural climate is "not as open anymore". She felt that "back in like 2019, having a pride sticker just was like normalized [...] Even if you don't agree with it [...] it

just is what it is, right?" She felt that in comparison now, "we're expected to like, entertain attitudes of homophobia [...] for whatever reasons, cultural reasons, whatever, we're giving like credence to these attitudes." She described feeling as if there has been a "surge or moral panic" of transphobia. She particularly noticed this with the stigma towards pronouns and cited that as a reason for not sharing her pronouns at work this year, saying that "the discourse around pronouns just doesn't feel very safe." Luna felt that these attitudes were possibly the result of "... an infiltration of America-style politics." Jules also felt this shift in his school, which he has described as an alternative high school that tends to have a more accepting staff and student population. He explained that nine years ago when the GSA had sweatshirts made, the whole club wore them regularly. He stated that "this time around, they're mostly purchased by staff, and it's a bigger club, but fewer students have purchased it because they don't necessarily feel comfortable wearing it around the school, which I think says a lot." The shift in culture emboldened Jules to be more openly supportive, but this had made him feel "a little bit more, not vulnerable, but a little bit more like I'm putting myself out there when I wear rainbows to school now". He also noticed this year, that in the optional space for pronouns on his start-of-term Google Forms:

> [...] students starting to put like, cheeky kind of responses or antagonistic types of responses, again, in the pronoun spot, which they can leave blank if they want. In the past, I'd have like, I'd say, 70% of kids who put their pronouns and 30% would just leave it blank. And now it's roughly the same, except every once in a while, I'll see when someone put "stupid question", or someone put "Christian" in the pronoun spot.

Jules also observed this shift outside of work on Facebook posts by acquaintances, "reposting anti-trans jokes, like pictures of bumper stickers." He believed that this showed that the premiere, Danielle Smith, through enforcing policies around gender identity, is "making up issues where there aren't issues [...] they're now becoming issues [...] Suddenly, these attitudes are becoming more prevalent." Jules noted that "there's more vocal discrimination than what I've noticed in the past" and he felt it extended outside of Alberta which "makes it even scarier." He felt that in Alberta, the conversations around the new policies regarding pronouns:

> [...] has created more hate and has been more divisive than anything in the past, even more than when the NDP was supporting our queer kids, and the [Catholic school board] was speaking against it. That was like, the Catholics were making them a joke of themselves, because everyone else in the world accepts it, but now it's less of a joke because so much more of the world is becoming vocal about it [...] it's going beyond the

> religious side of things now to just like plain, non-religious based bigotry, blatant homophobia, transphobia.

Welch, one of the student informants, also mentioned "a period of time where it [LGBTQ+ inclusivity] was kind of acceptable" and then referenced members in the provincial government who are blatantly transphobic, stating: "But now we have an MP in there who basically, like, I think she compared trans kids to feces[13]?", indicating that these attitudes are now being represented in positions of power and circulated in mainstream politics. This is summarized effectively by Luna, who referenced the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in discussing the blatant disregard for human rights she felt that these attitudes embodied:

> People think that this is like something that's up for debate when it's like, it's in the Charter to be respectful, that we respect people of all, whatever diverse representations, sexualities, etc. And it's like people are just kind of forgoing the Charter of Rights and Freedoms completely and like forgoing all of these well-established policies [...] They're just completely neglecting it as if it doesn't matter anymore. And that's scary [...] There needs to be some standard of protection for people to abide by, that needs to be like, actively enforced. When we open up these conversations around like sexuality and gender identity, we're essentially saying that these foundations and policies of protecting human rights are invalid, we're deciding who is considered human or not. And who has the right to dictate that? No one has a right to dictate that.

Luna's assessment addressed a core concern for many participants: the discomfort of having sexual orientation and gender identity treated as topics for debate rather than recognized as fundamental rights that should be permanently protected.

Reactions to Bill 27

Initial Reactions: Educators

Amongst informants in this study, there were no positive responses to the UCP's new legislation. Educators described their reactions as "horrified and disgusted", "disheartened", "frustrated and worried", "outraged", "dismay and disappointment, but not shock", "anger" and "fear." Jordan and Joan, both members of teacher GSAs, participated in emergency meetings to discuss the announcement of the (at the time) proposed legislation, where teachers tried to decipher what this would mean for themselves and their students. Jordan felt that the legislation

[13] Welch is referring to an Alberta MLA, not MP, Jennifer Johnson, who compared transgender youth to feces (Sousa, 2024).

was “a little bit of a yawn policy wise” because he felt his school board was enacting the same policies, saying “ours is more stringent. It insists on a child not being called what they requested to be called until they're 18.” He recalled a member of senior administration from the school board “either on this issue or in general, I forget which” stating that “parents own their children's names until their children are 18 [...] kind of like that same sort of old-fashioned way of thinking your children are, like you own them. Sort of like your chattel.” Although Jordan felt disgusted by the new legislation, because this was already the attitude in place in his school district, he did not feel too worried about how it might impact his school board because “We're either already ignoring or following it.”

Some informants felt that this legislation was a political tactic, as Adan put it: “it’s very much political theatre and very much just a way to garner votes and to pick low hanging fruit.” This was echoed by Jules, who felt the policy was delivered in a “manipulative and gaslighting way” referring to the framing of this policy by the UCP as being in the best interests of children[14] . Sylvia’s interpretation contradicted the belief that this was in the best interest of youth, saying “we’re trying to eliminate the issue. I feel like we’re trying to either straight wash all of these kids into identifying as straight[...] so that we don’t have to see them and that's how it feels, and it’s scary.”

Evey expressed concern that the implications of these policies would result in blaming teachers, rather than a critical examination of the system stating “I hope that in the horrible chance that there is [negative consequences], people ask themselves critically, who's the impetus behind this?” saying she would want people to be more critical of who is involved in the creation of such policies, and whether schools and teachers were part of the decision making. She felt that people often do not think about this enough, and as a result, “we just get more and more misinformed about education as a whole.” Evey’s concern was the if there was “potential fallout” from this policy that “one, that's horrible because we're waiting for something terrible to happen to a kid to think about consequences. That is a problem for me as someone who cares deeply about my kids. But I'm also worried that if that's the case [...] blame is going to land with

[14] (“Smith shares finer points of proposed trans student pronoun legislation”, 2024)

educators and not on a system that's forcing educators' hand." Evey's apprehensions illuminate a disconnect between policymakers and the experiences and feedback of practitioners whose perspectives were not included in decision making, although they are on the frontline working with students and dealing firsthand with consequences of policy.

Initial Reactions: Students

It was difficult to gauge the perspectives of students currently enrolled in schools, as most teacher participants did not hear many opinions from their students. Jules mentioned that the day after the announcement, students in his GSA were quiet, that "they weren't showing any signs of anger." He felt "unsettled and uncomfortable" and unsure about how he could comfort his students. In the next few weeks, some students began to ask him questions, concerned about how the legislation might affect them, to which he responded, "I didn't really know what to say, other than nothing's going to immediately change."

The student participants graduated before this policy was enacted. Skelly, who graduated in 2024, was still in his grade twelve year when the legislation was proposed in February 2024. The reactions of Werner, Skelly, and Welch echoed those of the educators in the study. Werner felt the fact that this legislation impacted both secular and Catholic schools was "a pretty obvious indication of an ideology push" and that it was "indicative of ignorance on the government's part" because he felt that "anybody with any degree of humanity, even if they're not educated on the issue, should be willing to listen [to both] perspectives [...] in an attempt to provide the greater good, you try and empathize with them, and you understand, you listen to them [...] it's very clear that that's not at all what the government is doing right now." Skelly felt the legislation will only cause harm, and that "there's no good that can come with this, other than parents feeling like they can control their kids."

Both Skelly and Welch mentioned Alberta's conservative reputation as playing a role in the establishment of Bill 27. Skelly expressed:

> We're going to have so much more conservative, close-minded people come out of the school system, and the world is going to be worse for it after this is put in place. It's a school in Alberta. Alberta is like the Texas of Canada, people aren't happy in the first place that people are allowed to be themselves here, and putting this legislation is going to give more reason to hate, more reason for hate crimes to increase.

Welch echoed this saying “We’re becoming like the States [...] it’s Alberta. It’s always been conservative.” The association between a policy around gender identity restrictions and Alberta’s conservative identity insinuates that Alberta’s conservativism serves as an environment that reinforces and normalizes traditional attitudes around gender and sexuality. Skelly’s statement that Alberta is the “Texas” of Canada, echoes teacher Luna’s earlier statement that there seems to be an “infiltration of American style politics”. Republican states, such as Texas, have also introduced harsher measures around the teaching of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools that some participants seemed to associate with Alberta’s political identity and history.

Policy Implications and Concerns

Several shared concerns about the consequences of Bill 27 were raised by the participants in this study. In general, everyone echoed Clay’s statement that “[the policy] felt like a step back, not in the direction that I feel like we need to be moving towards.” The main areas of concern detailed in this section were about parents, student autonomy, and mental health. All the informants were asked about their thoughts on how this legislation would impact Catholic schools specifically (in comparison to secular schools), in which the consensus was that such a policy will reverse progress made in recent years and silence students.

Parents and Student Autonomy

Bill 27 would require teachers to obtain parental consent or notifications (students aged 16 and 17) from parental guardians for different name and pronoun use. Naturally, concerns over parent involvement came up often with the educators. It is worth noting that although all the educators expressed concern over outing students to parents and the consequent harm that would follow, most educators still valued parental involvement and believed many parents wanted to be supportive. However, the prospect of informing parents of a student's preferred name or pronouns made every educator in this study uncomfortable. Adan stated about this aspect of the policy, “For teachers, it puts them in a worse position in my opinion, because what you're doing is again creating an “us versus them” between parents and teachers.”

Adan, who now works as part of a mental health team for a secular district, often works with families of 2SLGBTQ+ children. He felt that while the policy would affirm parents who do not accept their trans or nonbinary children, he felt that media had a role in shaping public perception of parents, saying that most parents “probably struggle with it, and they work on it,

and they get better. But that's not a good story, right? It doesn't give me a click. The click is like, the contentious thing." Sylvia expanded on this idea, believing that the rhetoric of the government made her feel as though "parents are being weaponized." She felt some parents might read the rhetoric around putting "decisions back in parents' hands" and feel as though "maybe this isn't so bad after all." Sylvia felt that the government was "selecting their language very, very carefully so that these parents are agreeing to things that maybe they wouldn't otherwise if they were framed differently. Being framed like, if you don't think this way, then you don't care about your kid."

In considering parents reactions and involvement, Evey reflected on herself as a parent. Although she also felt many parents would be supportive, she did not feel like this cancelled out the situations in which students are not safe at home:

> I think about this as a parent now myself [...] if my kid ends up identifying in a way that they feel safer telling someone else first, that's an issue with me. Like what have I like, in what ways, intentional or not, subtle or like unconsciously or consciously, have I made my kid feel like they're nervous about telling me? And that's like something that I would want to reflect on [...]And I think for a lot of kids, [...] parents do want to be a part of that and are more open than maybe kids even realized. But we know that is not the case for every student. [...] And we know that, for every kid who could be safe if their parents knew what their preferred name was or knew their pronouns or knew different things about them, for every kid who is safe, there's one who's not, whether we wish that was the case or not, it's true.

Several informants also believed that students had a right to privacy and autonomy. Reflecting on her teenage years, Luna believed that outing students did not benefit anyone:

> I genuinely do not believe that parents need to be involved in every aspect of the kid's life [...] I think a kid should have privacy. I think a kid should have the space and the opportunity to tell their parents what they want to tell them to a certain degree. Obviously if it affects their safety, yeah, that's different, like then you obviously want to involve parents. When I think about my own experiences at school, and I think about like how my parents just didn't understand me [...] it wouldn't have served me or them if they knew exactly what was going on in my life because they just weren't in a space where they could understand that. I don't think it does us any benefit to force parents to try to understand something that they just will not be able to and it's just going to cause more harm to everyone involved.

This idea of respecting a student's right to inform their parents at their own pace was brought up by two other participants. While everyone expressed concern over students being outed to

unaccepting family members, Joan and Welch importantly highlighted that even when a student has a safe home environment, respecting this autonomy is still necessary:

> Welch: I was out to my parents, but that would be devastating for me if someone told my parents before I was ready to tell them.
>
> Joan: [...] students, kids, young adults, you're gonna practice coming out in spaces that are the least scary at first, right? So, I'm way more low stakes than even friends and cousins anything like that, right? So, I'll try low stake areas first. And so, you're just practicing how to become this, how to do this and what not [...] As a grown adult in a pretty open family, I was still terrified. So, it's like a 13/14/15/16-year-old, why wouldn't it be like that?

Joan and Welch's perspectives here demonstrate that school is not just a space for learning, but a place where students can safely learn to navigate their identity and practice for situations in the real world. Of course, there was a greater concern surrounding students with unsafe home environments and how this would now impact their ability to feel safe at school. It became evident in informants' responses that it felt dangerous for teachers to make assumptions about a student's support system and their level of readiness to be open about their identity. Evey expressed concern over having to interpret a students' reaction about being out to their parents stating that " [...] even if that fear [about their parents' response] is misguided, maybe their parents are going to be really grateful to be a part of this conversation with them and help them, but before they know that and before that's confirmed, the unknown is dangerous too."

Concerns for Student Safety and Mental Health

Regardless of a students' home situation, there was an emphasis placed on the fact that school should be a safe environment, and if needed, a reprieve from home, where students can be themselves, as stated by Welch: "other than home, the other place you're supposed to feel safe in is school." This was made clear by Skelly who claimed that all the policy would do is "cause frustration and harm to the community, to the people who want to explore their identity in a safe space. If their home isn't safe to explore that identity [...] all this is going to do is prevent people from being safe in the environment that they need to be safe in, whether it be their home life, their school life, just walking out the door, people are going to be uncomfortable and unsafe." As an openly trans student in school, Skelly received more support from his school than he did from home. I asked him how such a policy would have impacted his experience:

> I have dealt with a lot of mental health issues, and you know in middle school, they got worse and worse, especially after, you know, I wasn't allowed to use that preferred name and pronouns, and that's what it's going to do to kids. I wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be alive if I wasn't allowed to, you know, be that person I was in high school [...] it could be a matter of life and death for some people. Like, suicide is like a huge thing, and it's talked about, but it's not really, it's still a taboo thing to talk about […] suicide risk is going to increase after this, and it's going to get worse for so many people, mental health issues are going to get worse for teenagers […] I wouldn't be here without the support that I got from school, and with them not being allowed to give that support to students, there's going to be so much more mental health problems for the students that come out of this. […] People won't want to go to school. People won't want to be around the education that they're getting, because they're not allowed to, you know, be safe in that place.

More than one educator expressed concerns over the impact on mental health if students in such situations could not access support as easily in school. Sylvia believed that students are not being given "the opportunity to like, investigate this on their own, or to find their own voice and to be who they are." She felt it was already difficult for students to be themselves "even when they're like "normal" or "typical" like it's tough for kids to be themselves." Sylvia felt that if policies weren't being put in place to protect students who are "different or apart from the global majority" then "we [figures of authority] are putting that already at-risk demographic at a greater risk. Sylvia pointed out how "teachers are going to feel very stifled" indicating that teachers might fear discussing gender identity or openly supporting students. This would "show students that we're afraid to support them" even though she felt teachers had "worked really hard to have students say we're the people that you can come to. We're the people that are going to support you, so please come to us. It's really hard for kids to go and actually do that and advocate for themselves." She believed therefore that this policy would impact the relationship between students and teachers:

> We're basically saying, unless your parents say yes, I can't have this conversation with you. Not only because I'm nervous, but because now I'm professionally unsafe. And kids, especially when they think that that teacher is their person, they don't want us to be unsafe either, so I don't think they're gonna want to have those discussions with us because they want to make sure we're OK, because I think we see each other as a community and then we see these policy creators as the other. Who is imposing all of these things on us that are going to damage and hurt? And keep us from learning at the end of the day, how are we supposed to learn if we can't even be ourselves?

Here, Sylvia echoed previous sentiments made by Evey about the division between policymakers and students and teachers, who Sylvia saw as allies against those with higher authority. She also

raised an important point about learning, which connected to a previous point made by Skelly that at-risk youth won't want to attend school. Ultimately, this indicates that learning can only happen in an environment in which students feel safe. Evey felt that if students could not turn to teachers, the burden of support would be placed on peers, which in turn, would lessen the load for teachers. She believed teachers would "deal with it [conversations about gender identity] less" because students will be scared to share. Therefore, her biggest concern was that:

> they'll [students] feel like they have nobody to tell. And then instead, [...] they may talk to each other and find community among each other. But again, because they're kids like, we don't ever want just kids to hold each other's struggles and trauma and fears. It's great to have resources and support amongst each other. But they're all going through their own things and like, that's why we encourage them to talk to adults [...] I think it's just going to shut down kids entirely [...] I just think it means they're just gonna internalize all of it.

At the time of these interviews, Alberta's premier stated publicly that in situations where teachers felt a student may face an unsafe home situation, that a protocol would be provided by Alberta Education to ensure that child's safety (CTV News Edmonton, 2024). Therefore, I did ask some participants to share their thoughts on potential supports, such as child protective services, in such situations. Evey and Luna both shared concerns over such a vague statement as a solution to an urgent situation. Evey questioned, "but how many kids do we have being worked with in social services in a variety of contexts? [...] it's not happening fast enough; it's not happening fully enough." Luna detailed the complexity of involving social services in such situations:

> How convenient that those supports are also equally underfunded, [...] it's just such wishful thinking to assume if that kid is in an unsafe environment, well, don't worry, we'll just call the social worker and that will fix everything. Social workers also have their frame of ability to do things to actually step in [...] what can a social worker actually do, right? What can police actually do? So much evidence of abuse or neglect in a home is needed before anything can be done. And that's a serious process that takes a long, long time and it's just like again this like, wildly misinformed, like warped thinking on the part of like these government bodies who think they can just swoop in and save something [...] all you're doing is you're just making the situation worse. Because now these parents who actively don't agree with or buy into this identity of these kids now [...] add in social workers or police, as if that's gonna make the situation better? If anything, that's gonna make the situation worse.

The problems raised by Evey and Luna were solidified by Adan through his experiences in working in group homes, explaining that "most of the kids were either involved in criminal activity" or "they were kicked out because they were trans or gay. We're still there, where kids

are getting kicked out of home, right? But we'd like to pretend we're so much better than that." The observations drawn on external supports such as group care and child protective services by Evey, Luna, and Adan point to the urgency of keeping schools a safe environment; there was clearly a lack of faith or trust that students in precarious home situations could be supported by government services due to issues like delays and funding, therefore teachers felt it necessary that schools at least provide that support.

Implications for Catholic Schools

All the informants believed that Bill 27's requirements for parental consent or notification for pronoun and name usage would have implications for all students and educators in the province of Alberta. This was confirmed by Sylvia, Adan, and Luna, who all had experience working for both secular and Catholic boards and had witnessed homophobic and transphobic attitudes in both school boards. However, all the informants in the study believed that the consequences of this legislation would affect Catholic schools differently. Joan questioned, "is this is going to put a backbone behind all the things that they've [Catholic schools] been like underhandedly trying to do? So, like they have government on their side, are they now just going to be able to, like just full-on, override any of the work we have actually done?" Joan's line of thinking was reinforced by Jordan who reflected on how the past NDP government in conjunction with the ATA which is "pretty good at queer inclusion" put more pressure on Catholic schools to be inclusive. In contrast, he mentions how now, because society's "[...] zeitgeist is more leaning towards antiqueer" that Catholic schools are "not going to get as much pushback from like a general public". As result, Jordan believed that "queer voices won't be considered as important" and "no one is going to pressure Catholic schools to have inclusive policies." This would result in "liberty to have as oppressive policies around queer students as they [Catholic schools] choose, which they may not view as oppressive, but certainly progressive people would." He summarized this by say that "the government creating that stigma then reduces the pushback and then the Catholic schools have the free reign to sort of indoctrinate and scare." Evey also felt that "there's potential for there to be less resistance in the Catholic board because they've already kind of been preparing for this [...] any step for extremism opens the door for someone to walk further down that path[...] I think it gives more room for those people who are maybe [...] misusing the faith as a means of persecution rather than a means of opening doors." Werner, a student informant, expressed similar sentiments

saying that in Catholic schools, there was a “doubling down of the issue” because in public (secular) schools “there’s not already that overarching religious prejudice towards it.” Werner worded the relationship between Catholic schools and the provincial government as “legislative power and this institutional power working together”. This idea was repeated by multiple educators like Sal, who believed that “where our faith already is a barrier, let’s be real, here’s going to add another layer [...] and it’s potentially masking, right? Like, “oh it’s not our faith, it’s the government.”

The participants uniformly believed that this legislation would be seen as a victory for Catholic school boards. It would mean that school boards now have a government policy to rely on if teachers or students challenged their directives. As Sal mentioned, the school board could even scapegoat the governments’ policy for implementing policies that are seen as harmful. These statements also made a link between conservative political agendas, even deemed as extremist by Evey, and Catholic stances on gender and sexuality as complimentary, and therefore could enable Catholic schools to be even more exclusionary towards 2SLGBTQ+ students. Adan felt that the exclusionary elements of Catholicism would be bolstered through Bill 27, stating that although he felt that teachers were “kind and caring people” and that kids will still “find a place”, but they will “always know that this is a place that is trying to change[...]something about you.” He felt that was “the Catholic way” and that “shame and guilt is Catholicism [...] it's always trying to say there's something wrong with you.” In Adan’s view, this policy would “create more of that”, concluding that “a kid who you know, would have been probably OK, now all it takes is one more interaction, and now we're not doing so great.” This connects to the above discussion over concerns of safety at home and in schools under Bill 27. Adan’s point implies that students in Catholic schools have the added layer of religious homophobia to deal with at school (and potentially also at home), and this policy could bolster these already hostile attitudes, threatening limited safe spaces for students.

Several informants felt that Catholic schools had made overall progress on 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion in the last few years, and the new legislation will threaten this progress, as Evey put it, “we were just starting to make these tiny steps, and I think it's gonna be a big leap back instead of tiny steps forward.” This was clearly the case in Skelly’s point of view:

> I'm gonna start with saying this about public schools: it's already safer to be in a public school as an LGBTQ kid than it is to be in a Catholic school, which seems pretty obvious, but, yeah, it is, and putting these laws in will make it unsafe to be in either [...] and in a Catholic school, I feel like it is a lot more dangerous to have these [policies] put in, because we in Catholic schools have just come out of this place of, it is so taboo to talk about this. We're not allowed to do this. We're not allowed to think about it. We're not allowed to speak about it. We're not allowed to, you know, be you in Catholic school. And this is just going to reverse all the progress that has been made in the Catholic school system. And if, like, this legislation ever gets lifted in the future, it's like, it's going to take so long to get back to that point of — because we haven't been allowed to talk about this stuff in Catholic schools for a long time, but only in high school, were we ever talking about it, and only in my 12th grade year were we ever talking about it, unprompted in class, right? — [...] there was so much progress to get where we are in Catholic schools, to be able to have, you know, our teachers, unprompted, talk about the LGBTQ+ community. And just it's gonna be so much more difficult to get back to that place after.

In Catholic school boards, the lack of written formalized policies mentioned in the previous chapter allowed educators to fall back on human rights legislation and incrementally fight for some LGBTQ+ inclusivity. These assessments by Evey and Skelly indicated that this legislation had the potential to reverse the progress that educators and students struggled for, and also create long-standing damage, which would again, place the work on educators and students to rebuild 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive environments.

Overall, there seemed to be a belief that less pressure would now be placed on Catholic boards to be inclusive, and exclusionary policies could be reinforced by the government. Conversely, Lily believed students in Catholic schools would be more prepared for such policies due to religious discrimination:

> I feel like maybe our kids might be able to cope with it a little better, only because they've experienced the hatred so much already. I think that, because they haven't seen the representation in their school, anyways, they're not going to be as affected as a [secular] school. It will think impact them, like, obviously, on an individual level or personal [...] I think they'll be able to handle it a little bit better than a student who is at a school that is accepting of it, and then all of a sudden, they can't be.

Lily's prediction is a somber reality. Based on the previous chapter, some Catholic schools like that of Jules' for instance, had a visibility active GSA, so the reversal of progress and its impacts would likely be quite apparent to students in that atmosphere. However, Lily was speaking from her own context which paralleled many other Catholic schools; her administration was already committed to strictly following directives from head office, and the presence of the GSA

suffered, especially without a full-time committed teacher to run it. Therefore, those students might indeed be more prepared to face exclusionary policies. However, Lily's assessment seemed to focus more on a school-wide impact, rather than an individual one, which could still be mitigated by individual teacher choices to make students feel safe.

Resistance and Refusal to Catholic Policies and Legislation

Resistance to oppression and discrimination was present amongst all informants. Student resistance was more ideological [with regards to legislation] rather than mobilized though action. However, this is not indicative of a lack of mobilization amongst 2SLGBTQ+ youth, as the sample only included three students who had graduated and would not be impacted by policies around consent and notification for preferred names and pronouns. However, prior to the introduction of the policy, during their school experiences, these students showed support for 2SLGBTQ+ visibility through disapproval of policies and homo/transphobic attitudes and participation in their school GSAs in a religiously oppressive environment, which are all forms of resistance to institutional repression. Due to the larger sample and ability to resist more overtly (because of their positions of power in comparison to students), educators showed more resistance and refusal towards the religiously based homo/transphobic policies detailed in the previous findings chapter. Additionally, all the educators in this sample refused to some degree to follow the UCP's mandate to retrieve parental consent or notification for preferred names and pronouns.

None of the educators felt comfortable potentially outing students to their parental guardians. Evey believed that "we've already scared students enough that we won't have to, sadly" but she also believed that all she "could do now is try to be as loving and make sure students feel safe while they're in my classroom to the best of my ability." In the event a student discloses something, she said she would speak to the student about the situation first, "about here's why we think it would be good to have your parents [be] part of this conversation. What are your reservations? Is there a way that I can help you have that conversation?" Other educators were more insistent that they would not participate, such as Joan, who believed "it goes against who I am as a human being." As a middle school teacher, Clay's students are under 16 and would therefore require parental consent, to which he stated, "that's not happening." He explained his thought process:

> I'm gonna ask that student if- who else is aware? Are your parents part of that conversation? Yes? Great. Awesome. If they're not part of that conversation, and they don't want me to disclose that then that is a conversation that only that student and I are going to have. Sorry, I'm not going to disclose that to their parents. I don't feel like keeping that information from the parents is going to harm the student in any capacity. If they have shared that with me it's because they feel safe enough in my presence to want me to know and to be honored to have that information and just being aware of that, I am now going to actively continue to make that space even safer for them, and am now able to look out for the behavior and the words of the students that they surround themselves with because I want to protect them.

Some educators made public displays of their disapproval and resistance. The morning after the UCP's initial policy announcement, Jules posted a photo to his social media wearing a sweatshirt with a rainbow heart, standing in front of a district banned safe space poster. He explained his reasoning:

> The reason I posted that was mainly because I know that I have former students who follow me on Instagram, who would be affected by the legislation. And I just wanted to get the message out there that regardless of whatever that post, that video is that Danielle Smith made yesterday, I'm not going to change how I do things here, which is giving every student my full support and particularly doing whatever I can to protect the most vulnerable kids in our school, which includes these trans kids who are now being targeted.

It is important to mention that the educators in this study were already activists in their school spaces and had been teaching for several years, which gave them a higher level of confidence. Most of them also had continuous contracts, meaning they were not under evaluation and their job security could not be easily threatened. Despite this, they recognized that all teachers cannot resist to the same degree, and those that can, may be more closely examined. Evey voiced that one day, she will probably "get fired" because she believed that "some of us are going to be looked at more carefully." She wanted to believe that how she currently responds to her students "won't change" but "until it's [legislation] really here [...] we think we know how we'll react to things, and I guess it might depend how much pressure is applied and what that pressure looks like and what the consequences to resistance are." Jules also felt that the new policies would have impacts on teachers' ability to resist. He believed there will be more fear amongst staff "who are afraid of losing their jobs or being reprimanded." He referenced the previously mentioned ATA safe space posters as a good example of this because some teachers listened to board directives and took them down, even if it went "against every fiber of their being."

Other educators, like Clay, considered other pathways to resistance. Clay believed that sometimes, to enact change and show resistance, following directive and getting on the same team as those in charge is necessary. This is reflected in his aspirations to become an openly gay administrator:

> If you want to see the change, you need to be part of the team that creates that change. I could sit here screaming at [district representative], I could bash my head on a brick wall, and nothing will ever change unless I'm on his team. [....] I can't think of one administrator who is open about their identity. I already am open about my identity. I am not shy about my husband and my life. I want to be the administrator moving forward who is already out [...] I'm not going to stop [trying] because I need to be part of that team that makes those decisions. I want to sit across the table from [district representative] and continue this conversation about why we need to be able to support our students in all capacities and not just on this issue, but in all capacities.

Clay's aspirations echo the idea throughout this chapter and the previous one that the work to create change is placed on individual teachers, and that power is limited; large scale change is more possible from the position of higher administration. Other participants, like Evey, expressed resistance to current Catholic frameworks in schools by reimagining possibilities for alternate religious interpretations of transgender identities. She talked about how the Church takes the stance that:

> God made man and woman, and God makes no mistakes, and God created us in his image. […] though we're fallible, we're like, also perfect [...] and maybe that is the way God created them [transgender people] because they have the courage to be as authentic as possible. And maybe actually adjusting our perception of that is like the way forward to a more loving faith.

More than one participant echoed the sentiment that there are other interpretations of the Bible that could greater opportunities for care, dignity, and acceptance unique to Catholic schools for all students.

To conclude my conversations with participants, I wanted to know if they felt any hope for Catholic schools with regards to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity, especially considering recent legislation, and why they chose to stay in the Catholic board despite their frustrations. Two of the educator informants, Sylvia and Adan, had left their Catholic school boards because they felt conflicted and frustrated with how the boards approached 2SLGBTQ+ issues. However, the rest actively chose to stay employed by a Catholic district despite stating that it challenged their

morals and integrity. When asked why they chose to remain, these educators talked about the importance of supporting vulnerable students in an oppressive space. This is encapsulated by Sal:

> If we don't fight, who will? It's like the [idea of], you're either anti racist, or you're not, right? So, like, If I wipe my hands and be like, I'm out, I'm just gonna leave, but if people who are advocates for these kids, who are our kids, are no longer advocates, well, those kids are still going to be there. That's why. I stay for those kids that come back 15 years later for coffee, you didn't know it, but you created the safe space.

For those that identified as part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community, they felt it was important for students to have diverse representation in Catholic schools. Clay stated that "we stay with the board because we wanna be what we never had going through Catholic schools. I never had queer representation growing up. So, I wanna be that person for those students that walk through my classroom doors." This idea of staying employed by the school board to create safe spaces and representation is in itself a form of resistance that many educators in this study were committed to.

Summary of Findings: Research Question 2

This chapter explored how Bill 27, which mandates parental consent or notification for students using preferred names or pronouns, impacts safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ students in publicly funded Catholic schools. Given the study's focus on 2SLGBTQ+ and allied educators and students, it is unsurprising that all participants strongly opposed the legislation, citing concerns over student safety, mental health, and barriers to learning. While some educators believed many parents would be supportive of their children, they remained concerned about students in unsafe home environments and doubted Alberta Education's ability to provide adequate and timely support. Participants unanimously agreed that schools must be a safe space where students have the right to privacy and autonomy over how and when to share their identities with their guardians, regardless of their home situation.

All the participants felt that this legislation would undermine recent progress for 2SLGBTQ+ visibility in Catholic schools. They clearly felt Bill 27 would give credence to school board attempts to thwart pronoun usage and visibility of diverse gender identities and expressions, allowing them to have official backing through written, formalized policy. Several teachers believed the law would deter students from confiding in teachers, placing an emotional

burden on them and their peers, which they saw as damaging to students' well-being. Participants also noted a broader cultural and political shift in Alberta toward less acceptance which they connected to the creation of this legislation, thereby indicating that this policy is already having negative implications for safe spaces. However, given their experience navigating existing restrictions, the educators in this study remained committed to resisting these barriers and continuing to support 2SLGBTQ+ students in Catholic schools.

Chapter 7: Discussions, Limitations, and Recommendations

This chapter brings the findings of chapters five and six into conversation with theoretical frameworks of repression and surveillance; these serve as tools to reflect on the social organization of Alberta's Catholic schools and the coordination of work done by educators and students. In uncovering participants' work and situating them within the complex web of these social relations, possibilities for resistance and solidarity were revealed, which are discussed later in this chapter. To begin, I return to the first research question which guided this study:

Question 1: What factors hinder or contribute to teacher/student resistance to divisive homo/transphobic rhetoric in the face of institutional repression?

In the introduction to this study, I expressed that I had no doubts about the fact that there were factors contributing to teachers' and students' ability to advocate for 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity, despite the institutional repression of Catholic schools. My past experiences as an English teacher and GSA teacher lead in an Alberta Catholic high school exposed me to these factors. I knew going into this research that students and educators were doing the work of demanding visibility in their schools because I *was* one of those educators, and my students did the work of opening my eyes to the realities of homophobia and transphobia in their everyday existence. When I first read Tonya Callaghan's *Homophobia in the Hallways: Heterosexism and Transphobia in Canadian Catholic Schools* (2018), I felt a sense of relief because my experiences encountering obstacles while seeking visibility for my students were affirmed – this was so much bigger than my school, or even my school district. I also felt frustrated at the vastness of institutional homophobia. I knew that 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy, at least in my school district, had taken leaps forward since Callaghan's study, yet I was simultaneously aware that so much had *not* changed; if anything, I felt that school boards had cleverly shifted their approach in how they were imposing heterosexist values. In my conversations with educators and recent high school graduates, identifying the factors hindering and supporting resistance revealed that school boards had adjusted their tactics according to the policies of provincial governments. A government like the NDP for example, put more pressure on Catholic schools to be inclusive through the enforcement of pro-GSA legislation. This emboldened teachers to lead clubs and pursue visibility, and school boards needed to find ways to appeal to these demands, while still enforcing Catholic values. When the UCP government took over, these efforts gradually became more apparent, as seen in the naming of GSA clubs after Catholic values, and the attempts at

controlling the sharing of pronouns. Through my study, Catholic schools in Alberta were ultimately revealed to be a complex textually enforced system of relations weaving church doctrine and provincial education and human rights legislation, and teachers and students were wrapped up in the everyday work of navigating this web.

The Social Relations of Catholic Schools

"People always start from themselves yet there are relations that reach beyond the immediacy of their experience" (Smith and Griffith, 2022, p. 77). The individual actions of the participants in this study revealed textually mediated relations that extended beyond the immediate school setting. As teachers and students spoke about their attempts at advocacy, their actions pointed to various "boss texts", governing texts in the form of "laws, procedures, policies, rules, regulations, and so on" (Smith and Griffith, 2022, p. 94). In narrating their actions, participants revealed an awareness of these texts[15] — such as those guaranteeing student access to GSAs, or those entrenching protections against gender identity and sexual orientation discrimination, making it difficult for school boards to put their restrictive policies in writing. This showed a consciousness of their rights as depicted in *The Education Act, The Charter of Rights and Freedoms,* and *The Alberta Human Rights Act.* This was also clear when teachers like Luna and Evey tried to incorporate Catholic values into their arguments when advocating for inclusivity, pointing to Vatican and pastoral documents that outline the Church's doctrine on gender identity and homosexuality. Catholic "boss" texts however did not outline specific procedures for Catholic school boards to enforce but instead, outlined Catholic values and beliefs that should be permeated in all areas of school life. Therefore, policies were enacted based on these doctrinal documents as specific circumstances arose.

There were no concrete, publicly accessible policies communicated district-wide, across the three school districts that participants belonged to about GSA formation or activities, ATA safe space posters, pride flags, or pronoun sharing in email signatures. Yet the informants who pursued these measures were met with rejection or appeasement. Smith and Griffith (2022) explain that "boss texts of institutional discourse are also waiting to be filled with substance extracted from the actualities of people's lives and doings. The contents are [...] representations constructed to fit the shells of institutional discourse" (p.93). In other words, school boards

[15] These texts are detailed in Chapter 4: Policies, Texts and Institutional Language.

developed policies based on Church doctrine as they encountered situations such as requests from teachers or distribution of 2SLGBTQ+ resources from the teacher union. Through governing texts, institutional language is "activated in various settings [making] it possible to generalize representations across multiple particular settings" (Smith and Griffith, 2022, p. 94). Rather than creating a generalized, public set of formal policies for specific situations, the school boards kept themselves safe from publicly contradicting human rights legislations, confining the enactment of their governing Catholic texts to individual meetings with teachers, and administrators, who were then sent out to enforce directives amongst their school staff. This lack of written school policy resulted in ambiguous and inconsistent enforcement by administrators at the school level, shaping students' and teachers' ability to resist homo/transphobic rhetoric to varied degrees. Yet, this inconsistency itself was enough of a pattern that a "standardized sequence" (Smith and Griffith, 2022, p. 94) of procedure — one that furthered institutional discourse and social relations (Smith and Griffith, 2022) — became an apparent force amongst the experiences of participants.

The Shifting Gaze of the Panopticon

In her study of educators and youth in Alberta and Ontario Catholic schools, Callaghan (2018) used Foucault's Panopticon (2012 [1975]) as a metaphor for the doctrinal disciplining of non-heterosexuals in these school settings. Callaghan uncovered how participants engaged in a form of self-surveillance; many of them remained closeted to various degrees or avoided any association with homosexuality to protect themselves. In my study, the approaches of educators and students showed that they did not fully internalize this disciplinary gaze. The transgender and nonbinary students in this study were out in high school and active in their school GSAs. Werner, a heterosexual cisgender student, considered himself an ally in high school, with friends in the 2SLGBTQ+ community at his school. Three of the teachers in this study were open about their sexuality with staff and students, and the rest were vocal allies, and all of them participated in visible advocacy to some degree. The religious disciplinary gaze of the panopticon was no longer as omnipresent in the school districts presented in this research as it was at the time of Callaghan's study (2018). This may be in part due to Alberta's NDP government (2015-2019) and the enforcement of 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive legislation, and therefore, more representation and acceptance societally during this period. The noticeable shift towards acceptance of differing sexual identities reveals how Catholic schools are intertwined in a complex web of social

relations that includes the government in addition to the Church, and how the work of resistance to religious homo/transphobia in these school settings can be emboldened through inclusive government policies.

However, the panoptical gaze in Catholic schools did not disappear altogether. Werner, one of the student participants, stated about religious rhetoric in his school: "it's still propping up, it's always there, just like bubbling under the surface, propagating" (p.61). This gaze instead shifted towards a manipulative approach as a response to pressure from the government, educators, and students. Freire (2018 [1970]) defines the anti-dialogical tactic of manipulation as "the response of the oppressor to the new concrete conditions of the historical process" (p.148) in the form of "pacts between the dominant and the dominated classes— pacts which, if considered superficially, might give the impression of a dialogue between the classes. In reality, however, these pacts are not dialogue, because their true objectives are determined by the unequivocal interest of the dominant elites" (p.148). The ambiguous policies of the school boards in this study, because of the lack of official formalized policies, often resulted in appeasement of teachers and students, of which there were copious examples. For instance, Evey's student council being placated with generic social media posts in honor of pride "that says you are loved and there could be no rainbows, there could be no like reference to pride" (p.76); Lily being told by a superintendent that she can only put up a pride flag if a student asks for it (p.66); Jordan's school board hosting "breaking bread" meetings under the guise of 2SLGBTQ+ collaboration, while "telling us what we can and can't do and what we can and can't say" (p.75). While these responses could be viewed as school boards attempting to straddle religious and human rights, the frustrated students and educators in this study viewed it as a method of placation and ultimately, serving to reinforce religious heterosexual norms.

This manipulation also served to keep allied educators fragmented. If the school boards produced written formal policies restricting 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity, educators and students could potentially be more likely to come together and oppose policies. As Freire (2018 [1970]) states, "Concepts such as unity, organization, and struggle are immediately dangerous [...] to the oppressors [...] (p. 141)." If requests for resources and activities are dealt with via individual meetings and placation, there is less likelihood that students and teachers will share their experiences and collectively protest. Freire argues that oppressors keep the oppressed divided, elevating leaders who speak for rather than with their communities (2018 [1970]). There were

several instances where principals were given directives by school board officials to take back to their staff and enforce. Of course, participants had principals that used their discretion and did not enforce district messaging about pronouns or safe space posters. Others, however, operated in line with school board "policy", whether out of fear or agreement, creating a clear division between teachers and students versus administrators. These types of administrators did not work with teachers and students as allies but surveilled them as an extension of the school board to ensure enforcement of board directives and therefore, of Catholic values. Arbitrary enforcement of school board directives repressed educator and student advocacy to a certain extent due to its inconsistency. However, it also shaped how participants approached their work, simultaneously burdening them with extra labor and bolstering resistance, leading to the creation of pockets of safety and support for their students despite an overall negative attitude of administration toward this work.

The Work of Catholic Educators and Students

I would like to briefly return to IE's definition of *generous work*. The concept of "work" is more than just paid labour. "Generous work" as defined by Smith and Griffith (2022), is that which is observable and done intentionally; applying this concept makes "work visible that is not ordinarily recognized as such" (p.42) and "opens up directions for discovering what people know about what they do, and hence their work implicitly or explicitly carries connections with sequences of action beyond the individual" (p.42). Revealing the work of students and educators in Catholic schools also uncovered pockets of resistance and solidarity in everyday practices. In this study, educators and students took on different roles in their educational settings, but ultimately, were doing the same work in different ways: resisting homophobic and transphobic practices. Educators did this by advocating for visibility, working around restrictive measures, and creating safe spaces in their classrooms and schools. This was evident in the ways that teachers sought appropriate protocols for the official establishment of GSAs, how they worked alongside students to plan activities like bake sales or campaigns, and in their planning of the presentation of these ideas through a Catholic lens to administrators or school board officials to gain approval. Educators also did the work of making their support visible to 2SLGBTQ+ students through rainbow stickers in their classrooms, incorporating 2SLGBTQ+ content into their lessons, including spaces on class surveys for students to share pronouns, and displaying their pronouns on their email signatures.

For students, the work of resisting was often found in survival. Skelly, the transgender student participant in this study, revealed this through his hardships in middle school and high school; coming to school and trying to focus on the work of learning was difficult when he felt unsafe and unsupported by teachers who would intentionally deadname him, or when he had to sit through class debates about transgender issues in current events. While most students would seek support from a teacher or administrator following a bullying incident, Welch, a nonbinary student, prioritized their well-being following the harassment at a club fair by *not* pursuing disciplinary action because they would need to explain themselves and prove the incident, not trusting that administration would respond accordingly and support them. Students like Skelly and Welch were also active in their school's GSA, participating in the work of supporting other students and advocating for their community.

It is clear through the experiences of student participants that their work was, to the extent possible, relieved by the allyship of committed teachers. If teachers' advocacy work became stifled, then students' ability to feel supported was impeded. This was made evident through educators' and students' claims that the work of advocacy fell on individual educators. A teacher would need to be passionate about 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity to do the work of running a visibly active GSA which involved pursuing resources and approval for activities through meetings with administration and sometimes even with school board officials, on top of their regular workload. The actions of students and teachers were organized by the same sets of policies and procedures, but teachers tried to serve as a barrier between the communication of these policies and their students. This often made them more aware of what went on "behind the scenes" than students. Of course, teachers were also faced with the emotional work of delivering the news of rejection to students, such as when Clay had to tell his students their request for a GSA was turned down, or when Lily had to tell her GSA that their proposal for painting a flag on a sidewalk was rejected unless they went off school property. Because of such experiences, some educators like Joan, took on the added labor of pursuing approval from the school board in advance before students put effort into planning any activities to emotionally protect her students.

Though students and teachers approached the work of advocacy in different ways because of their differing roles and abilities, it was clear that they were allies. The participants in this study expressed an openness among allied teachers and students; teachers openly

communicated the procedures and outcomes of meetings with district officials (even if they did not share exact details) and as a result, students did not place the blame for rejection on their teachers. It was clear to them that there was a distinct divide between the stance of the institution (the school board, the Church), and what their teachers believed. Teachers and students saw themselves as working *with* one another against a common oppressive force that was shaping their ability to enact change. The participants here were engaged in a critical consciousness (Freire, 2018 [1970]) because of their dialogue with the colleagues and/or students in their school settings about the oppressive social forces shaping their school experiences. Callaghan (2018) evokes Foucault's ideas about repressive power (1990 [1978]) in her analysis of power operations in Catholic schools. She states:

> In this study, the Vatican appears to try to control the lived expression of non-heterosexuality by disseminating Catholic doctrine on the topic in Catholic schools. In its persistent refusal to recognize non-heterosexuality (and its various subcategories) as a legitimate sexual orientation, the Vatican and Catholic schools make themselves obligated to define and to "take great pains to relate in detail the things it does not say" (Foucault, 1976 /1990, p. 8). (p.184)

The more the Catholic Church aimed to repress gender and sexuality in schools, the more obligated they were to continuously address it through doctrinal documents, inadvertently inviting resistance. In my study, it was clear that the Catholic school boards enforced both repressive (tells us what not to do) and normalizing (convinces us to take certain actions or follow certain norms) forms of power. Telling educators that they could not put up pride flags or share pronouns on signatures or student surveys did not result in their following orders but emboldened them to stand their ground. If they did not change their practices because of a school board order, they found ways around the so-called rules. The normalizing modes of enforcing power were more insidious, such as school boards creating their own safe space posters, or appeasing requests for activities with alternatives. In either case, educators and students drew on their knowledge of the Catholic school system, the Church, and government policies to find ways to create visibility for their 2SLGBTQ+ students, despite repression. I will now turn to my second research question:

Question 2: How are safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ students in publicly funded Catholic schools shaped by recent provincial legislation in Alberta?

Bill 27, which became The Education Amendment Act, came into effect in December 2024 by Alberta's UCP government. This study focused on the section of the amendment that requires parental notification if a student aged 16 or 17 wants to use a different pronoun or name and requires consent for students aged 15 and under. As a piece of legislation that governs all students across the province, it emerged as part of a larger political and institutional framework that governs Catholic schools in Alberta alongside the Catholic Church. The reactions of participants in this study to this legislation revealed a tension between the daily work of students and educators and the requirements imposed by this new policy. At the time of the interviews, this policy had only been proposed, not yet enacted, and it was clear that its proposal was complicating the already intricate work of 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy and safety in Catholic schools.

Through my conversations about UCP legislation with students and educators, another organizing force became apparent. Several participants pointed to a cultural shift in negative attitudes towards 2SLGBTQ+ people, especially transgender and gender nonconforming individuals, as an extension of "American style politics" (p.94). The concern over a shift towards hostile rhetoric points to an overlap with the global rise in right-wing populist movements, which extends to North America, especially in the United States with the (re) election of Donald Trump. These movements share overlapping interests and ideological structures with the anti-gender movement, and with Christianity, including the Catholic Church, of which gender is a central component. Within these movements, social and moral reforms target comprehensive sex education, LGBTQ+ rights, and feminism, to preserve the heteronormative family narrative (Gilbert, 2014; Graff et al., 2019; Graff and Korolczuk, 2022; Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Venegas, 2022). In the United States, conservative anti-gender educational reforms across states such as Texas, Virginia, and Florida, include book bans and discussions of SOGI topics (Fowler et al., 2024; Goldberg et al., 2024; Phipps, 2022). Mudde (2019) characterized the recent rise of the new far-right by its mainstream presence, including the incorporation of populist right-wing policies by mainstream politicians. Jules, one of the high school teachers in this study, observed that the shift he felt towards hostile attitudes extended beyond Alberta, which speaks to the mainstreaming of anti-gender rhetoric into the Canadian political landscape. He and other teachers felt this shift within the atmosphere of their schools; Lily's superintendent came to the school to speak to staff about not promoting "gender ideology"; Jules noted that fewer students were openly expressing their GSA membership; Luna did not share her pronouns at work

because “the discourse around pronouns doesn’t feel very safe right now” (p.91). These examples, among others, demonstrated that safe spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ youth were already being shaped before Bill 27 was officially passed, revealing this legislation as an extension of right-wing populist discourses.

It became clear in my conversations with participants that they did not feel their voices and concerns were of importance to the formation of this legislation. This reflects the idea that 2SLGBTQ+ students are often caught in the middle of conservative educational reforms, and their teachers become tasked with the policing of their gender and sexuality, required to impose heteronormative standards (Gilbert, 2014; Meyer, 2010). This lack of consultation further aligns with the previously mentioned divide between educators and students versus the school board, extending further to policymakers in the Alberta government. The reactions of participants to this legislation highlighted the extent to which their actions and experiences were shaped by the imposing force of government policy. Every participant in this study felt worry, fear, anger, and disappointment about the enactment of Bill 27. All of them had concerns over students’ right to autonomy over navigating their identities, their safety and well-being; teachers were worried that exposing students to their parents, especially if they were already in precarious home environments, now meant students would be unsafe at home *and* at school. If students could not feel safe to be themselves at school and seek the support of trusted adults, then they could not fully engage in the task of learning and engaging in school if their mental health was at risk. Furthermore, the passing of such legislation pointed to an institutionally reinforced sense of fear, a government-enforced panoptical gaze that polices expressions of gender nonconformity. As some educators pointed out, some colleagues were already in fear of openly expressing support; some avoided pronoun use, some felt more vulnerable in wearing rainbows, and others mentioned that depending on the consequences for resistance and their work situations, such legislation might scare teachers into compliance or avoidance in supporting students altogether. The multitude of concerns regarding this legation revealed the burden placed on allied educators who would now need to contend with the emotional labor of policing their behavior to keep their jobs protected while keeping students safe, especially in Catholic schools, where educators were already taking on the work of protecting their students from religiously imposed homophobia and transphobia.

At the time of the interviews, The Education Amendment Act had only been a proposal. There was still hope amongst participants that it would potentially not pass. The fear amongst participants, especially educators continuing to work in Catholic school settings, was that this legislation would undermine progress made towards increased 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity. Educators in this study had experienced a lack of written school board policy, where religiously based directives about sharing pronouns or displaying pride flags were enforced through closed-door meetings. Educators felt that they could fall back on human rights legislation in these cases to resist and work around "policy" and continue to visibly support their students. They felt concerned that the introduction of Bill 27 would affirm school board messaging regarding pronoun usage and visibility of diverse gender identities and expressions. Now, school boards could wipe their hands clean of the responsibility to be inclusive of *all* students, pointing to formalized government policy as an excuse. Whereas prior to the UCP, the government served as an institutional force that restrained Catholic school boards from fully enforcing the views of the Church onto teachers and students, now it seemed to become a partnering organizing force, subduing the advocacy work of educators and students. A few teachers in this study also believed that this legislation would keep students from seeking the support of teachers, placing more emotional labor on students, and potentially disintegrating the allyship between students and teachers, consequently dividing them.

Conclusion

Although the participants in this study expressed very valid and real concerns about setbacks in Catholic schools, not all hope was lost. The educators in this study were not only acutely aware of the forces that governed their practices from school boards to the Catholic Church to government legislation, but they were also skilled at navigating these relations to support their students. They were, sadly, already equipped with the tools and resilience needed to find loopholes and create pockets of safety for their 2SLGBTQ+ students. Referring to Callaghan's application of repressive power (2018), in telling people what not to do, the introduction of this legislation inspired resistance, despite concerns. The educators in this study were already resisting institutional homophobia and transphobia through their allyship. The graduated student participants represented many other students like them, who were open about their sexuality and gender identity in settings that promote doctrine that condemns their expression. Of course, publicized discourse about sexuality and sharing pronouns in schools

could potentially negatively impact those not already doing this work in Catholic schools, but as for the participants in this study, it was not going to cause them to retreat. In fact, all educator informants claimed that they would not change any of the work they were doing, outright refusing to follow the policy if it meant causing harm to vulnerable students. Likewise, the students in the study believed that Catholic school teachers, like the allied teachers they had in their high schools, would continue to find loopholes. Ultimately, the mainstreaming of anti-gender discourse and subsequent legislation only spurred resistance and refusal amongst those already doing the work.

The educators in this study showed an overwhelming commitment to resisting divisive homo/transphobic rhetoric in the face of institutionalized repression, whether that be Catholic schools or government legislation, or both (since two of the educators in this study had left Catholic schools but still had to grapple with the implications of Bill 27). The eight educators who remained working in the Catholic system expressed frustration, disagreement, and even challenges to their integrity in working for the Catholic school boards. Yet, they expressed a commitment to pursuing change; the LGB teachers in this study wanted to be a source of representation, and all the Catholic board educators felt they had a responsibility to stay and create safe spaces. Some educator and student participants voiced hope that there could be ways to invite more possibilities into Catholic interpretations of transgender, nonbinary, and sexual identities, recognizing that Catholics were not monolithic in their views, and current interpretations of doctrine in Alberta's Catholic schools were limiting for all people. Shifting the current perspective of gender and sexuality in the Catholic Church to include an appreciation of diversity as a representation of God's multifaceted creation could create a more caring environment for *all* students in Catholic schools. Other participants in this study, despite their commitment to continue supporting students in Catholic schools, felt that if Catholic school boards could not change their approaches to 2SLGBTQ+ inclusivity, they should not exist in a publicly funded model. Such perspectives recognize that it is not enough to simply focus on what is wrong within systems of power but to ask what we really want (Kelley, Tuck, & Yang, 2013). In uncovering the standpoint of the oppressed, the ways in which participants actively challenge power through daily practices, and how those practices are shaped by that power, come to be revealed, setting the groundwork for change. Kelley, Tuck, and Yang (2013) write:

> Resistance can dislodge certain oppressive and social practices. Resistance can lead to conservative reinforcements of power. Resistance simply is a description, I think, of pushing against social forces [....] resistance always changes the conditions in which you resist. It may make them better, worse, but the conditions are changed. Resistance is a motive of history in some ways, in that when the conditions change, it means that you cannot always use the same strategies to respond to those new changed conditions (p. 95).

As educators and students in these environments do the work of pushing for change in oppressive environments, their conditions change; they are constantly being reshaped by organizing forces. In this study, this was evident through the introduction of conservative parental rights legislation. This study aimed to create an awareness of how people navigate their worlds and of how they do their work. In connecting those experiences across individuals, doors can be opened to new strategies for resistance as conditions and social forces shift.

Limitations and Future Directions

In imagining future directions and extensions of this study, it is important to reflect on the limitations of this research. The ten educators in this study were relatively diverse in their sexuality (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and majority heterosexual), gender (5 male and 5 female), race, age, and years of experience. A benefit to such a study would be to draw on perspectives of transgender and nonbinary educators but given the stance of the Catholic Church on these identities, such educators are unlikely, understandably so, to be open about their identities in these settings. There were only three student participants in this study, and all were recent graduates from Alberta's Catholic high schools. Though difficult, a benefit to investigating the impacts of parental rights legislation on safe spaces would be to hear the viewpoints of students currently enrolled in Catholic schools who are experiencing the direct impacts of policy daily. Additionally, hearing from a larger student sample with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds would benefit this study. The intersection of racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities with religion and 2SLGBTQ+ identities would produce different experiences of religious homo/transphobia (Newman, 2018) in combination with the impacts of parental rights legislation.

Several participants in this study mentioned interactions with administrators as central to shaping their experiences. Hearing from educators in administrative roles (principals, vice principals) would be an asset as they are responsible for communicating school board directives and managing school climates in response to legislation. Other diverse educator roles would also be useful, such as counselors, to understand the impact of restrictive legislation on student well-

being. Lastly, this study pulled educators and students from three school boards in Alberta. I aimed to obtain perspectives from rural as well as urban schools, hoping to see how different demographics and environments responded to Catholic doctrine and provincial legislation. However, two of the school boards in this study operated in large urban centers, and though one served a smaller municipality, it was still relatively large and diverse. An understanding of how rural teachers and 2SLGBTQ+ youth respond and are affected by the shifting political climate, as well as school and provincial legislation, would provide a more balanced and representative depiction of gender and sexuality in Alberta's Catholic schools.

Finally, as previously mentioned, The Education Amendment Act had not yet been passed at the time of the interviews. Therefore, the concerns over the legislation's implications were hypothetical predictions based on participants' experiences in oppressive environments. A future follow-up study on the impacts of parental rights legislation in Alberta, in both secular and Catholic schools, would provide a more accurate understanding of the ongoing implications surrounding student safety, well-being, repression of teacher allyship, and new strategies for resistance amongst youth and educators.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Consent Form

Participant Informed Consent Form for Semi-Structured Interviews

Researcher(s):

Adela Czyzewska, Graduate Student, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University. Phone: (403) 837-1789 Email: adela.czyzewska@mail.mcgill.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Jayne Malenfant, Department of Integrated Studies in Education, McGill University. jayne.malenfant@mcgill.ca

Title of Project: The Impacts of Catholic Policies and Parental Rights Legislation on LGBTQ2S+ Youth and Educators in Alberta's Publicly Funded Catholic Schools

Purpose of the Study:
This is an invitation to participate in a research study which I am undertaking as part of my Master's thesis. The study delves into the effects of Catholic policies and recent legislative changes in Alberta, specifically those restricting conversations and expressions related to gender and sexuality, in Catholic secondary schools. The aim is to understand how these policies influence LGBTQ2S+ individuals and their allies within these educational settings, examining their access to support.

Study Procedures:
Your participation will involve an individual interview (approximately 60 minutes). You will be provided with the interview questions in advance via email to increase your familiarity and comfort. You are not required to prepare answers in advance. During the interview, I may prompt you to expand on some of the questions and responses you provide. Additionally, I may request to ask you follow-up questions (via telephone call or secure audio-call using McGill's Microsoft Teams) to clarify your primary interview if needed.

The study requires your permission to audio record your interview for accuracy in the transcription process. I will record our interview using a personal dictaphone. The interviews will be transcribed by me within three weeks of the interview using McGill's Microsoft Word Online Transcription. The interview transcripts will only be used to write my master's thesis. During the transcription process, all identity markers will be removed from your interview, and you be assigned a pseudonym.

Voluntary Participation:

Your participation in this study is voluntary, meaning you have the right to withdraw at any time. You do not have to answer any question that you are not comfortable answering. We may also stop the interview at any time if you need a break or feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, you may refuse to participate in parts of the study, decline to answer any question, and withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, prior to publication of the MA thesis, as data will be in print at this point. If you decide to withdraw from participating in the study prior to the publication date, all identifiable information and data collected will be destroyed, unless you provide permission otherwise.

To withdraw from the study or any components of it, please contact the principal investigator (PI), Adela Czyzewska.

Potential Risks and Benefits:
All efforts to minimize risk and harm will be taken during the study to the best of the researcher's ability. Some of the questions may prompt you discuss uncomfortable or negative memories or experiences. You are not required to share anything that you are not comfortable with, and you may take breaks or stop the process as needed. You will be provided with LGBTQ2S+ resources for support should you require them. The focus of the interview will not be on traumatic experiences, but more so on policies and processes that have influenced your experiences.

By choosing to participate, teacher and student participants show their interest in raising awareness of current realities and difficulties in providing supports for LGBTQ2S+ youth in Catholic schools. This study will aim to provide tools for teachers to take into their advocacy and practice.

Confidentiality and Access:
Every effort will be made to ensure that confidentiality and your privacy are protected. Your responses to the study questions will be anonymized except for your professional role (e.g., teacher). Your name, specific place of employment, or other features making you identifiable will not be included in my analysis or final study. Your responses will be assigned a code that identifies you, and I will be the only person who can decode the responses.

Recordings will be transcribed and used for data analysis purposes only and not shared with anyone outside the research project. Interviews will be transcribed by the PI within 3 weeks of recording, during the period of data collection: September 1, 2024 – October 31, 2024. Only I will have access to the identifiable data. Participant names will be replaced with a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Following the data collection period, participants will be able to withdraw their consent and anonymized data (through pseudonyms) until December 1, 2024.

I will store the information linking the codes to names and will be the only researcher with access to it. Transcripts, data, notes, participants ID list, and consent forms, will be stored on my secure external hard drive, then uploaded to McGill's ONE Drive, and stored in password encrypted folder for seven years. Any physical copies of the data, notes, and the consent forms will be stored in the PI's home office, in a secure locked drawer.

Dissemination of Results

The results will be compiled into a thesis that will be submitted to McGill University. Participants will be provided with the published findings should they want to see them. Since the data will be stored on the McGill Cloud, data may be communicated outside of Quebec.

Informed Consent Form

To the participants:

I have read and understand the terms of the present consent form.

Please sign below if you have read the above information and consent to participate in this study. Agreeing to participate in this study does not waive any of your rights or release the researcher from their responsibilities. You have the right to consult your study file to verify the personal information gathered, and to have it corrected, if necessary, by contacting adela.czyzewska@mail.mcgill.ca. To ensure the study is being conducted properly, authorized individuals, such as a member of the Research Ethics Board, may have access to information. A copy of this consent form will be given to you, and I will keep a copy.

Participant's Name (please print):

Participant's Signature:

Date:

If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights or welfare as a participant in this research study, please contact the McGill Ethics Officer at 514-398-6831 or daniel.tesolin@mcgill.ca

Appendix 2: Interview Guide for Teacher/Educator Participants

1. What is your relationship to the LGBTQ2S community? Are there any other identities you would like to mention that you feel are relevant to your experiences?
2. Could you please describe how and why you came to work in a Catholic school setting here in Alberta?
    a. What grade levels are you currently teaching/ what is your role?
3. Were you ever made aware, formally, or informally, of any policies about sexual orientation and gender identity in your workplace?
4. How would you describe the attitude in your workplace towards topics of gender and sexuality?
    a. Have you noticed any shifts or changes in these attitudes?
5. If you wanted to approach a discussion around gender or sexuality issues with students, how would you approach it? What would be your thought process, or the steps you would need to take?
6. Does your workplace have a Gay-Straight alliance or other LGBTQ2S supports for students?
    a. If yes, how do these supports operate? Would you say they are successful? Why or why not?
    b. How do you find information or resources to support LGBTQ2S students?
7. Do you feel that gender and sexuality should be addressed in Catholic schools? Why or why not?
8. Has there been any discussion or reactions in your school to Alberta's new legislation regarding pronouns and gender and sexuality in the classroom?
9. How do you feel this new legislation will impact the school environment, for both teachers and students?
10. What do you think the future will look like for LGBTQ2S students in Catholic schools in Alberta? What positive changes might be a part of that future?

Appendix 3: Interview Guide for Student Participants

1. How do you identify on the gender identity and sexual orientation spectrum? Are there any other identities you would like to mention that you feel are relevant to your experiences?
2. When did you graduate? For how long did you attend Catholic schools in Alberta and why did you attend a Catholic school?
3. How were topics of gender and sexuality taught, discussed, celebrated, or rejected in your school?
    a. Did you ever witness homophobia or transphobia in your school? If yes, how was it addressed?
4. Were you ever made aware, formally, or informally, of any policies about sexual orientation and gender identity in your Catholic school?
5. Do you feel that gender and sexuality should be addressed in Catholic schools? Why or why not?
6. Did your school have a Gay-Straight alliance or any other LGBTQ2S supports?
    a. If yes, how were you made aware of these supports?
    b. Did you access these supports? Why or why not?
    c. Would you consider these supports useful or successful? Why or why not?
7. What are your thoughts about Alberta's new legislation regarding pronouns and gender and sexuality and how it will impact students?
8. What do you think the future will look like for LGBTQ2S students in Catholic schools in Alberta? What positive changes might be a part of that future?