Heteronormativity, homonormativity, and gender variance in the classroom: perceptions and reflections from school social workers

Dirk De Jong
University at Albany, State University of New York, ddejong@siena.edu

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HETERONORMATIVITY, HOMONORMATIVITY, AND GENDER VARIANCE 
IN THE CLASSROOM: 
PERCEPTIONS AND REFLECTIONS FROM SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

By

Dirk de Jong

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ABSTRACT

Public school personnel encounter increasing numbers of gender-variant and transgender students, according to anecdotal reports. Very little is known about the response of social workers to this rather new phenomenon. This qualitative study, framed conceptually by notions from Queer theory, attempted to explore the perceptions, attitudes, and self-reported practices of a sample of school social workers in the Northeastern United States with respect to gender socialization and gender variance in the classroom. The data were collected by way of individual interviews.

The results of this study confirm other research accounts of schools as heteronormative environments in which a rigid gender binary is reinforced, sexuality in general appears to be viewed as a toxic topic, and differences with respect to gender and sexuality are typically silenced. Nevertheless, the findings of this study also show that gender variant students are indeed becoming more known and visible. While the social workers in this study appeared willing to support them and to advocate for them, confusion about a perceived link between gender and sexual identity – theoretically described as a form of homonormativity -- is analyzed as an obstacle in that respect. Implications for the training of current and future school social workers are discussed, and suggestions are made with respect to the need to transform the heteronormative nature of public education.

Key words: Gender variance, transgender, school social work, Queer theory, heteronormativity, homonormativity.
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Finally, and especially, I want to thank the social workers who volunteered for this study: I hope I have done justice to your honest sharing of experiences, perceptions and
beliefs. May our work in some small measure benefit gender-variant and transgender students.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The phenomenon of gender variance among young children has received increased public attention during the past few years, after it was featured on such popular tv shows as “20/20” and “Oprah”. The Philadelphia Trans Health Conference and Seattle's Gender Odyssey, two large transgender conferences, began to include programming for gender-variant children and their families, and in 2006 Trans Youth Family Allies (TYFA), a parent-run advocacy organization was founded.

First Some Definitions

A common (though somewhat restrictive) definition of gender variance in childhood reads as follows:

We define gender variance as a behavioral pattern of intense, pervasive, and persistent interests and behaviors characterized as typical of the opposite gender (...). These gender-variant behaviors include play activities, toys and hobbies, clothing and external appearance, identification with role models, preference for other-gender play mates, and statements indicating a wish to be of the other sex. Avoidance of rough play is typically observed in boys, and aversion to female-typed clothing and appearance is often seen in girls. (Menvielle, Perrin, & Tuerk, 2005, p. 39).

A hand-out from the advocacy group Trans Youth Family Allies describes transgender children simply as “those whose gender identity or expression differs from expectations for their physical sex characteristics or birth sex.” (Imatyfa.org, Learning the Lingo, 2008). TYFA also prefers the terms “affirmed female” (rather than mtf or m2f) for “an individual who was born anatomically male, however, identifies as female”, and “affirmed male” (rather than ftm or f2m) for “an individual who was born anatomically female, however identifies as male.” (Imatyfa.org, Learning the Lingo, 2008).
In this country, gender variance did not become an issue of public discussion until the early 1950’s, following the much publicized sex reassignment surgery of Christine Jorgensen (Drescher, 2010). By 1980 a description of gender identity disorder (GID) had found its way into the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association*, a few years after homosexuality was removed from its pages (not coincidentally, some would argue; Sedgwick, 1991; also see review by Bryant, 2006). The diagnosis remained controversial (Cohen-Kettenis & Pfafflin, 2010; Drescher, 2010; Heraldsen, Ehrbar, Gorton & Menvielle, 2010; Ross, 2009; Vance, Cohen-Kettenis, Drescher, Meyer-Bahlburg, Pfafflin, & Zucker, 2010; Langer & Martin, 2004). Typically, gender-variant and transgender individuals would like to see their condition defined as purely medical rather than psychiatric, thereby eliminating the stigma of mental illness while retaining access to intervention (i.e. sex reassignment through hormone therapy and, if desired, surgery). Relative to the social work profession, a 2009 commentary in the journal *Social Work* is noteworthy (Ault & Brzuzy, 2009). Referring to an “ethical stance to fight social injustice”, the authors called for the removal of GID from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, since it “....promotes and sustains discrimination against people who present nonnormative expressions of gender and discourages all of us from exploring and experiencing our full human potential.” (p. 189).

In the recently published 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), the diagnosis of gender identity disorder was renamed gender dysphoria, while the diagnostic criteria were revised and made specific for either children, or for adolescents and adults. The DSM-5 lists as overarching diagnostic criteria a “marked incongruence between one’s experienced/expressed gender and assigned gender, of at least 6 months’ duration”, plus “clinically significant distress” in areas of social functioning, like school or work. For children, these diagnostic criteria can be manifested with respect to a “strong preference” for cross-gender clothing, play, playmates, and toys, “a strong dislike of one’s sexual anatomy”, and “a strong desire for the primary and/or secondary sex characteristics that match
one’s experienced gender”. For adolescents (and adults), the criteria may manifest themselves more particularly with respect to primary and secondary sex characteristics, “a strong desire to be of the other gender (or some alternative gender different from one’s assigned gender)” and to be treated as such, as well as “a strong conviction that one has the typical feelings and reactions of the other gender” (American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013, pp. 452-453). Also, gender dysphoria has its own chapter in the DSM-5 and is no longer linked clinically to sexual dysfunction and paraphilias. The changes described above are generally seen as positive by the transgender and gender-variant community, although many still advocate for the complete removal of a pathologizing diagnosis, arguing instead for a medical approach analogous to the treatment of pregnancy (see Lev, 2013).

For the sake of clarification, it should be noted that the term of gender variance covers a broad spectrum of feelings and behaviors, ranging from gender nonconformity to gender dysphoria and cross-gender identification. In concordance with the conventions of a binary system, those at the ends of the spectrum often identify themselves in terms of the traditional gender categorization (i.e. female or male). By contrast, individuals who find themselves more or less in the vast middle range of the gender continuum may refer to themselves as “(gender)queer” or “gender questioning”.

Aspects of gender variance can be found among individuals who question gender assumptions, as well as among those for who gender issues flow from their sexual identity (since gender nonconformity can be part of how gays or lesbians present themselves or are perceived by others). Gender nonconformity can be more controversial than a complete gender transformation, as it explicitly challenges (rather than confirms) the traditional female-male binary. This, in conjunction with the lack of studies regarding transgender youth, is the reason for including research on the school experiences of gay and lesbian students in the literature review presented as part of this dissertation.
The Problem

The problem addressed in this study can be summarized as follows:

- Anecdotal reports indicate increasing numbers of known transgender and gender-variant children. These children come to the attention of educators and service providers at younger ages (as young as 4 and 5).
- Research done in schools suggests that gender-variant students are at risk for being bullied, especially given a heteronormative environment (i.e. an environment in which heterosexuality and stereotypical gender notions prevail).
- The literature on school social work practice with gender variant children is extremely limited and the knowledge base of school social workers in this area is presumed to be limited as well.
- Gender variance, especially among young children, can be difficult to understand, and social workers may have difficulty relating to this population in a truly empathic manner.
- School social workers typically practice in a heteronormative environment and may face obstacles in the application of a “diversity” perspective with regard to gender-variant students.

The Researcher in Relation to the Study

The study reported on here is a qualitative study. Qualitative research values reflexivity, an examination of the relationship between the researcher and that which is researched (Cresswell, 2007, pp. 178/179). Qualitative research also encourages the use of “personal voice” (Patton, 2002, p. 64), as an attempt to reduce the distance between researcher, participant, and audience. Therefore, at this point, some brief autobiographical and personal notes, written as a first-person narrative, are in order.

I was born in The Netherlands and emigrated to the United States in my early twenties.
Professionally, I have worked in the field of education as a teacher, special education teacher, and social worker for more than thirty years. I identify with “queer” in terms of its non-binary conceptualization of gender, based on my personal and professional experiences, and my aspirations for alliance building (Taormino, 2003; Schlichter, 2004). As a school social worker I have strongly advocated for a generalist practice model, targeting systemic change. I see my role as researcher in that light as well. This dissertation, framed in part by Queer theory, aims to contribute to the important dialogue about gender and sex, particularly as it applies to the public school setting.

The original impetus for the proposed project came from my experience working with a number of gender-variant children and attendance at the national Trans Health Conference in Philadelphia for the past seven years. More specifically, my initial interest in the topic of gender variance, as manifested in school, concerned the divergent views about whether or not transgender students ought to “come out” or remain “stealth”. Anecdotally, some parents and professionals have argued that gender identity is a personal issue and that disclosure and public discussion might lead to stigmatization of the student and a backlash by conservative segments of the community, while others have suggested that hiding a child's transgender status interferes with appropriate ego development and could result in ill effects on a student’s mental health. Clearly, “coming out” versus “being stealth” has a multitude of emotional, practical, and political ramifications.

Upon further reflection, I developed a second strand of possible research by considering the concept of “school climate” as an antecedent variable. Thus, refocusing the study on the perceptions, attitudes, and practices of school staff (social workers in particular) with regard to the issues of gender identity, gender socialization, gender expression, and gender variance seemed to make sense. Such an inquiry would be relevant not only to transgender students (whether “out” or “stealth”), but also to those who are “gender-fluid” or “gender nonconforming”. This shift in focus to the response by school staff was consistent with the view that gender variance is not an
issue of individual pathology, but is instead only a problem in the context of societal
discrimination and marginalization.

I submitted the reconceptualized proposal initially to satisfy requirements for a doctoral-
level seminar in qualitative research in the division of Educational Theory and Practice, School of
Education, University at Albany. It was at that point critiqued by the instructor and the students in
the course, and revised accordingly. After further elaboration and review, it evolved into the
current study.

Having described some basic terms, a general idea of the research problem, and the
reasons for examining this problem further, I will use the following chapters to discuss a review
of the relevant literature, the theoretical framework for the study, the methodology, the findings,
and some conclusions and recommendations with regard to school social work practice and
policy.
CHAPTER 2

Gender Variance

This chapter will provide a review of the existing research with respect to gender variance, specifically with regard to children and adolescents. Following a brief discussion about views of gender variance as either an issue of individual pathology or a social problem of discrimination, the following topics will be addressed: The prevalence of gender variance among youth, theories about its etiology, the developmental course of gender variance, and current standards of care (or best practices) with respect to gender-variant children and adolescents.

Pathology or Marginalization?

Expressing a gender identity other than the one assigned at birth, or accommodating such expression by one’s child, is not an easy road for anyone involved. Gender-variant and transgender people in the United States have frequently faced marginalization and discrimination, and sometimes outright violence. For example, a survey of 6,450 transgender and gender-nonconforming participants (Grant et al., 2011) found that anti-transgender bias was experienced often and in many settings (and compounded by racism for transgender people of color). Many respondents reported living in extreme poverty, having faced discrimination in employment, housing, and medical care. Based on survey responses, incidents involving physical and sexual abuse, family rejection, and suicide attempts appeared to be disproportionally high. Similarly, with respect to the younger generation, a report published by GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) documented high levels of verbal and physical harassment, resulting in school absenteeism and diminished educational performance among transgender students (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009).

Findings such as those cited above support the arguments of those in the transgender/gender-variant community who blame societal forces for their problems and reject the notions of pathology implied by any psychiatric label. In this respect, advocates have pointed
out the resilience of the transgender population, particularly following gender transition. Thus, 78% of the sample in the survey mentioned above reported that they were more comfortable at work and were doing a better job after transitioning (Grant et al., 2011). This figure corresponds with the positive outcomes (though based on “very low quality evidence”) suggested by a meta-analysis of quality of life and psychosocial indicators following hormonal therapy and sex reassignment surgery of individuals diagnosed with gender identity disorder (Murad et al., 2010, pp. 229/230). Such positive adjustments in the context of normalization were also found in the GLSEN study: “Transgender students who were out to most or all other students and school staff reported a greater sense of belonging to their school community than those who were not out or only out to a few other students or staff.” (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009, p. xii).

Prevalence of Gender Variance Among Youth

The prevalence of gender variance is still very much in question and estimates vary widely. Published estimates with regard to the (old) diagnosis of gender identity disorder for adults typically were in the range of one per several thousand individuals (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 535); WPATH, 2011; De Cuypere et al., 2007). Interestingly, prevalence estimates of gender variance and “gender identity disorder” among children and adolescents have been significantly higher than the rates of gender identity disorder among adults just cited, but definitional and methodological issues cloud the discussion. Using a six-item GID scale completed by parents, a twin study by Coolidge et al. found that 2.3% of the children (309 twins between the ages of 4 and 7) fell in the “clinically significant range” (Coolidge, Thede, & Young, 2002, p. 256). While the researchers qualify this finding as a possible “upper limit” given the study's sample size, they also state that it “would appear to counter claims that GID is a rare or very rare phenomenon.” (Coolidge, Thede, & Young, 2002, p. 256). Bradley and Zucker (1997), in their review of the literature of gender identity disorder in children and adolescents, cite the finding that 1.3% of 4-5 year old boys and 5% of 4-5 year old girls in the standardization sample of the Child Behavior Checklist “sometimes or frequently wished to be of the opposite sex”.

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(Bradley & Zucker, 1997, p. 874). They state: “Although these data do not define rates of GID, they suggest that these behaviors are not uncommon in clinical populations and that clinicians may need to inquire systematically about symptoms of GID to determine which children might meet criteria.” (Bradley & Zucker, 1997, p. 874).

Incidentally, the notion of patriarchy does not necessarily explain the difference between boys and girls, as this would imply too much of a reductionist model of cross-gender identification (just as it would be too simplistic to explain the difference by suggesting that natal girls may be allowed greater “role stretch” than natal boys). In this context, note also Judith Butler's comments on female-to-male cross-gender identification, from her essay on GID in *Undoing Gender*:

There are crude analyses that suggest that FTM happens only because it is easier to be a man in society than a woman. But those analyses don't ask whether it is easier to be *trans* than to be in a perceived bio-gender, that is, a gender that seems to “follow” from natal sex. If social advantage were ruling all these decisions unilaterally, then the forces in favor of social conformity would probably win the day. (Butler, 2004, p. 94).

Clearly, “gender identity disorder” as a condition was difficult to measure and refinements in the diagnostic criteria may change the prevalence statistics. Nevertheless, it seems that the broader phenomenon of gender variance, including gender nonconformity, is not quite as rare as might have been assumed. In this context, a qualitative study of gender socialization in an English primary school (Renold, 2004) is noteworthy, as the researcher reports that over one third of the boys resisted normative expressions of masculinity and over two thirds expressed distress “…as they struggled to negotiate the impossible fiction of hegemonic masculinity.” (Renold, 2004, p. 249).
The Etiology of Gender Variance

The etiology of gender variance remains unknown at this time. Starting in the fifties, psychoanalytic theory suggested that cross-gender identification functioned as an immature defense mechanism. While now mostly rejected (along with similar notions regarding homosexuality), psychodynamic factors, socialization practices, and parenting issues have been and continue to be scrutinized as potential variables in the etiological puzzle (Bradley & Zucker, 1997; Bradley & Zucker, 2003; Zucker, 2008; Zucker, Wood, Singh, & Bradley, 2012). Writing from this perspective, the authors have proposed a “dynamic” (Bradley & Zucker, 1997, p. 878) or “multifactorial” (Bradley & Zucker, 2003, p. 267; Zucker, 2008, p. 360; Zucker, Wood, Singh, & Bradley, 2012, p. 369) conceptualization of gender identity disorder that, compared to other models, places a considerable emphasis on family pathology. However, it is based, so far, only on anecdotal reports of (primarily male-to-female) gender variance.

Although the multifactorial model acknowledges a role for biological predisposition, other theoretical frameworks assign much greater significance to biology in the emergence of gender variance. Proponents of this view point to the literature on intersexed individuals (people with ambiguous genitalia) as suggesting a strong biological basis for gender identity, along with developmental factors. For example, with regard to the treatment of intersexed people, noted sex researcher Milton Diamond wrote: “A person's most basic, natural character cannot easily be programmed out of existence, even by socialization, hormone administration, psychiatry, and surgery. The individual's maturing brain and developing personality will determine how he or she should live.” (Diamond, 2007).

In addition, those favoring a model with a strong biological component argue that research is beginning to show that biological factors and genetic differences are indeed related to cross-gender behavior, quite apart from any environmental variables. For example, prenatal exposure to high levels of male sex hormones in biological girls, a condition called congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH), has been linked with stereotypical boys' play (see Collaer & Hines,
Also, using sophisticated brain imaging techniques, researchers in Japan compared 11 FTM subjects with a female control group and found differences in blood flow patterns within regions of the cortex related to sexual awareness and behavior (Nawata et al., 2010). Additionally, a Swedish study found preliminary evidence for genetic differences related to sex hormones in a sample of 29 MTF transsexuals (Henningsson et al., 2005), while research on a sample of 314 child and adolescent twins suggested “a strong heritable component to GID” (Coolidge, Thede, & Young, 2002, p. 251). A recent review of the literature on twin case studies also (cautiously) supported the role of genetic factors (Heylens et al., 2012).

**Developmental Course of Gender Variance**

Given the overall lack of research on the topic, data on the developmental course of gender variance in children and adolescents are sketchy as well. The main variable in this regard concerns the response by the child’s family to the gender-variant behavior. Thus, strong parental rejection of the behavior most likely would lead to its suppression, even at the cost of significant psychological distress and possible mental health problems (see Ryan, 2009, for research regarding the differential outcomes for LGBT youth depending on family rejection or support). Given the general lack of social acceptance of gender variance, this mechanism may well affect prevalence figures, as well as data concerning a “typical” developmental trajectory.

For all children, gender-related toy and activity preferences start as early as fourteen months, and sex-segregated social play begins when children are around three years old (LaFreniere, 2011). Congruent with these observations, gender variance is often reported by parents as first manifesting itself before the age of three. It appears that more biological boys than girls are seen in gender disorder clinics and that a significant majority of all of these children may eventually identify themselves as gay or lesbian rather than transgender (Green, 1987; Menvielle, Tuerk, & Perrin, 2005; Drummond, Bradley, Peterson-Badali, & Zucker, 2008). This last finding has been interpreted both as a natural development in the context of parental acceptance of gender-variant behavior (Menvielle, Tuerk, & Perrin, 2005; Rosenberg, 2002) and as the result of
reparative (i.e. re-socialization) therapy (Zucker, 2008). However, the statistics may be artifacts of relative levels of acceptance, i.e. “tomboyish girls” are more accepted than feminine boys and therefore are less likely to be referred for treatment (see Sedgewick, 1991), and being gay is more acceptable than being transgender. Also, one important variable concerns the relative emphasis on “surface behaviors of cross-gender identification” (Drummond et al., 2008, p. 42) in the DSM-IV criteria for childhood gender identity disorder, which may lead to the inclusion of children with milder forms of gender dysphoria and gender-variant behavior, in addition to those who persist in their desire to identify as the opposite sex. Additionally, since the sample reported on by Drummond et al. (2008) was recruited from clients who, as children, had been referred to a gender identity clinic known for its use of reparative therapy, it is not clear to what extent the disappearance of more extreme cross-gender identification and behavior in that sample was achieved coercively and at what emotional cost. The mental health consequences of coercive therapy and more subtle social pressure certainly need to be taken into account when evaluating the developmental trajectory of gender dysphoria.

Finally, it needs to be noted that a study from The Netherlands (Steensma, Biemond, de Boer, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2011) seemed to substantiate the view that the degree of gender dysphoria in childhood may be a critical variable in terms of outcome during adolescence. While the researchers cautioned against hasty conclusions (given the possibility of biased self-reporting), their qualitative inquiry, which examined the developmental process of “persisters” and “desisters” with respect to gender dysphoria, found different “underlying motives” (p. 15) and different trajectories for the two groups. A recently published quantitative follow-up study confirmed the earlier findings and also found a greater likelihood of persisters among natal girls (Steensma, McGuire, Kreukels, Beekman, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2013a).
Standards of Care

Practices concerning the treatment of transgender individuals, including children and adolescents, have generally been informed by guidelines from the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, previously known as the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association. These guidelines, now in their seventh revision, are known as the Standards of Care (WPATH, 2011).

Views on the treatment of gender-dysphoric children and adolescents have changed significantly over time. For example, following an initial psychoanalytical phase during the 1950's and 60's, behavioral treatment became prominent in the 70's (see, for example, Rekers, 1979). Bolstered in part by Green's research on feminine boys (Green, 1987), variations on the behavioral approach continue to be used until this day, based on the argument that the majority of referred children do not desire sex reassignment as adolescents or adults (Bradley & Zucker, 1997; Zucker, 2008; Zucker, Wood, Singh, & Bradley, 2012). As previously stated, that argument loses at least some of its validity given the questionable criteria that have been used when sampling these children. For example, WPATH's Standards of Care (WPATH, 2011, p. 5) point to the difference between gender nonconformity (gender expression that violates certain cultural norms) and gender dysphoria (distress due to a mismatch between gender identity and gender assignment at birth). Other literature notes the wide range of presentation in terms of gender variance among children and adolescents (Menvielle, Tuerk, & Perrin, 2005). Finally, the research that does exist focuses primarily on boys, which has been attributed to a concern over possible homosexual outcomes (Sedgwick, 1991).

Starting in the mid-1990's, hormonal and surgical intervention for late adolescents with severe gender dysphoria was pioneered in The Netherlands and, although the study samples were small, positive results were reported in terms of psychological and social functioning following medical treatment; gender dysphoria had disappeared and none of the subjects regretted the sex reassignment procedures (Cohen-Kettenis & van Goozen, 1997; Smith, van Goozen, & Cohen-
Kettenis, 2001).

In terms of current treatment practices with gender-variant children, there appears to be a decline in the use of psychotherapeutic intervention (a combination of behavioral and psychodynamic treatment) aimed at changing the gender-variant child. In fact, such reparative therapy is no longer seen as best practice, judging by WPATH's Standards of Care. Not only with regard to adults, but also in reference to children and adolescents, this document clearly states that therapy aimed at changing gender identity and expression is not effective, and – moreover – that “Such treatment is no longer considered ethical.” (WPATH, 2011, p. 16).

In contrast to reparative therapy, the consensus view on best practice with gender variant children appears to be moving towards treatment aimed at “acceptance, support, self-esteem enhancement, and education” (Rosenberg, 2002). This type of intervention may include both individual and group treatment, and typically involves parents as well (Menvielle and Tuerk, 2002). Therapeutically, gender-variant children appear to benefit greatly from knowing that there are others like them. Based on that observation, Camp Aranu'tig (www.camparanutiq.org) now offers week-long camp experiences for transgender and gender-variant youth on both the East and West Coasts, while other organizations offer multi-day retreats.

A recent study of resilience among transgender youth (Grossman, D’Augelli, & Frank, 2011) confirms the need for a supportive/educational approach. This study of 55 transgender youth, ages 15-21, found that

....higher self-esteem, a higher sense of personal mastery, and greater perceived social support predicted positive mental health outcomes.(....) However, emotion-oriented coping predicted negative mental health outcomes; consequently, the implications lead to the conclusion that enhancing task-oriented coping may be effective in assisting transgender youth in achieving their anticipated futures. (Grossman et al., 2011, p. 112).
While acknowledging the study's limitations in terms of (convenience) sampling and measurement (partly self-reports), the researchers also note that, at an average of three years past disclosure, “...the majority of parental reactions remained very negative or negative [italics in original]”, suggesting “...the important need for psycho-education programs and other interventions with parents of transgender youth.” (Grossman et al., 2011, p. 112).

By suggesting that caregivers follow the child's lead in terms of gender identity and expression and that professionals support the families in that process, several stages of gender transition have now been identified (WPATH, 2011). Thus, gender-dysphoric children as young as age 4 or 5 may transition socially to the gender they identify with by changing clothing and hair style, and by being addressed with a new name and referred to with different, gender-appropriate pronouns. However, the WPATH Standards of Care provide only qualified endorsement of early social transitions, suggesting they may be “in-between” (for example, only at home) and/or presented as “an exploration”. (WPATH, 2011, p. 17).

Youth whose gender dysphoria persists can be prescribed puberty-blocking medication (injections or via a long-lasting patch) by a pediatric endocrinologist. This medication stops the development of secondary sex characteristics in both sexes, as well as menses in biological girls, and allows time for the continued exploration of gender identity. The effects of puberty blockers are completely reversible. The typical rationale in favor of puberty blockers was well articulated by the bioethicist Simona Giordana (2008), who argued against the English ban on the use of blockers by young adolescents (since lifted), by noting that “Transgender children who are not treated for their condition are at a high risk of violence and suicide.”(p. 580). She concluded:

If allowing puberty to progress appears likely to harm the child, puberty should be suspended. There is nothing unethical with interfering with spontaneous development, when spontaneous development causes great harm to the child. Indeed, it is unethical to
let children suffer, when their suffering can be alleviated.

This is not responding with medicine to a problem that is social in nature. This is responding with medicine to a serious medical problem that causes enormous distress to the sufferers and makes them prefer unqualified help, street life and even death, to life with GID (Giordano, 2008, p. 583).

In the next phase of intervention, adolescents with persisting gender dysphoria may become eligible for cross-sex hormonal therapy. The effects of this treatment are only partially reversible. Generally, cross-sex hormones are not prescribed until age 16, although they can be given at a younger age if conditions warrant (e.g. severe gender dysphoria combined with a prolonged prior treatment of puberty blockers). Surgical sex reassignment generally does not occur until the age of legal majority (with the possible exception of chest surgery for FTM transsexuals) and until the patient has lived in the affirmed gender role for at least twelve months.

The effects of the various and staged transitions for gender-dysphoric children and adolescents are currently under investigation and few data are yet available. So far, one prospective follow-up study has shown improved psychological functioning for gender-dysphoric adolescents who used puberty blockers to suppress the development of secondary sex characteristics (deVries, Steensma, Doreleijers, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2011). In this study of seventy adolescents, measures were taken at the start of puberty suppression, and again right before treatment with cross-gender hormones. According to scores on the Child Behavior Check List and the Youth Self Report, the adolescents “showed a significant decrease in behavioral and emotional problems over time....” (deVries et al., 2011, p. 2280). Their scores on the Beck Depression Inventory also decreased significantly, but symptoms of anxiety and anger did not change. Neither did scores related to gender dysphoria or body image (deVries et al., 2011).

In March of 2012, the Journal of Homosexuality published a special issue on “The
treatment of gender dysphoric/gender variant children and adolescents”, which aimed to describe several clinical approaches in use currently, as well as “the philosophical and ethical issues they raise” (Drescher & Byne, 2012 [a], p. 295). It shows an emerging consensus regarding the benefits of puberty blockers to prevent psychological distress among gender-dysphoric adolescents, as well as recommendations for family support as part of comprehensive treatment (de Vries & Cohen-Kettenis, 2012; Edwards-Leeper & Spack, 2012; Menvielle, 2012; Ehrensaft, 2012). Also, in line with the review presented in this paper, the special issue of the Journal of Homosexuality suggests that the treatment approach advocated by Zucker et al. (2012) is the outlier because of its focus on family pathology and its inclusion of purposeful re-socialization with peers of the child's natal sex, psychodynamic and behavioral components now considered controversial in the field. By contrast, Ehrensaft's (2012) “true gender self therapy” is an explicitly child-driven model with the goal of establishing supports within the family and community. However, the most significant article in this special issue may well be the summary of “....what we know and what we have yet to learn” (Drescher & Byne, 2012 [b]), which illustrates rather clearly the limited state of knowledge with respect to (the the treatment of) gender variance in children. Perhaps chief among the remaining questions, affecting many others, is the issue of subtypes of gender dysphoria/gender variance. In this respect, observations by biologist Fausto-Sterling (2012) regarding the complex and dynamic interaction between biological, social, and developmental variables contributing to gender identity provide appropriate commentary on the various viewpoints exemplified by the “special issue”.

The literature review presented thus far suggests varying levels of (sometimes vaguely worded) support for accommodating gender-variant feelings and behaviors of children. However, some dissenting voices must be noted. For example, Alice Dreger, a bioethicist, is clearly ambivalent about transitioning gender-variant children, citing the long-term consequences of such a move (Dreger, 2009). However, her comments that parents may favor having a transitioned child over a “different” child, or more disparagingly yet, may prefer a transgender child over a
gay son or a lesbian daughter (explicitly comparing that approach to official Iranian policies; Dreger, 2009, p. 28), suggest an absence of clinical knowledge regarding gender-variant youth and their parents. Although research in this area is lacking, all anecdotal evidence indicates that parents of transgender children go through heart-wrenching struggles and are well aware of the implications of their decisions. And while most children and families seem to weather the inevitable storms, it is hardly a trivial matter to have to fight a school district for a child's right to use the bathroom of choice, pay thousands of dollars for uncovered medical expenses, alienate extended family, or uproot one's household to move to a less transphobic community, all of which are possible scenarios.

Opposition against any type of gender transition, be it by children or adults, has also been voiced by radical feminists like Sheila Jeffreys. In a critique of Britain's Gender Recognition Act of 2004 (which allowed transgender individuals, even those who have not undergone a medical transition, to apply for new birth certificates) Jeffreys notes:

> It [the Act] gives credence to the notion that 'gender' exists and is a reasonable basis for social organization rather than a social construction which founds the subordination of women. In this sense, it is a profoundly retrogressive piece of legislation. (Jeffreys, 2008, p. 342).

However, Jeffreys herself acknowledges her point of view as a minority perspective among feminists, who generally saw the Gender Recognition Act as a critique of the binary system of genderization and a positive step forward.

Obviously, an issue as “new” and far-reaching (personally, politically, philosophically, ethically) as gender variance is going to create dissenting views. Also, as new data begin to come in, views are moderated and become more nuanced over time. For example, researchers from The Netherlands recently expressed concern about the premature social transitioning of young
children, since their gender dysphoria may not persist (Steensma and Cohen-Kettenis, 2011). In sum: The current literature indicates areas of agreement regarding carefully staged transitions for appropriate candidates, particularly during adolescence, and a somewhat fuzzy consensus to not challenge expressions of gender variance among youth generally.
CHAPTER 3

A Theoretical Framework

This chapter describes the theoretical constructs that frame the present study. It reviews the history of social constructionism in conceptualizations of gender and the more recent emergence of Queer theory. It also discusses heteronormativity, particularly as it relates to education, and “queer consciousness” with respect to the social work profession. Finally, it outlines a model of multi-cultural counseling based on virtue ethics as a possible way to capture a sensitive approach toward social work practice with gender-variant students.

Gender Identity and Social Constructionism

Inquiry into the functioning of gender-variant children in school needs to take into account the institutional climate of public schools in the United States, particularly with respect to issues of gender and sexuality. To this end, the following sections of this paper review some key theoretical concepts from social constructionist and, subsequently, Queer theory. The studies cited are meant to illustrate these concepts and their evolution over the past few decades.

Views on gender identity changed dramatically as the second wave of feminism, gaining momentum during the sixties, washed away “essentialist” notions (gender as a biological given) and replaced them with models of social interaction and construction. Accordingly, genderization became viewed as a process of social rituals, as discussed in Goffman's essay on “The arrangement between the sexes”:

> It is not, then, the social consequences of innate sex differences that must be explained, but the way these differences were (and are) put forward as a warrant for our social arrangements, and, most important of all, the way in which the institutional workings of society ensured that this accounting would seem sound. (Goffman, 1977, p. 302).

This same framework led to the phrase “doing gender”, described as follows:

> Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men,
differences that are not natural, essential, or biological. Once the differences have been constructed, they are used to reinforce the 'essentialness' of gender. (…) Many situations are not clearly sex categorized to begin with, nor is what transpires within them obviously gender relevant. Yet any social encounter can be pressed into service in the interest of doing gender. (West & Zimmerman, 1987; pp. 137/138).

However, “doing gender” ultimately seemed to reinforce stereotypical conceptualizations of what is means to be male or female, masculine or feminine. This can be seen, for example, in a relatively early study of gender socialization at the elementary school level, written from a social constructionist theoretical perspective (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992; Adler & Adler, 1998). The analysis of this research is guided by the notion of popularity, operationally defined as being liked by the greatest number of peers, being the most influential in formulating group opinions, and having the greatest impact in terms of setting boundaries for the in-group. The resulting findings showed that the popularity of boys was based on athletic ability, “coolness” (primarily a function of dress and appearance), toughness and defiance vis-a-vis adult authority, and a sense of “savoir-faire” (or social maturity). For girls, the elements determining popularity were being of higher socio-economic status, having permissive parents (leading to fewer restrictions on participation in social functions), portraying the “right” physical appearance (including clothing), and demonstrating a certain level of social precociousness (particularly in terms of flirtatious behavior with boys). Additionally, high academic performance was considered a negative factor for boys, but not for girls. The main findings of the Adler et al. (1992) study concerns the observations that boys are socialized into a “cult of masculinity” (characterized by toughness, physicality, autonomy, and coolness), while girls are taught to adhere to values of compliance, passivity, conformity, and romance. The researchers also noted:

“…both boys and girls are active and passive within their own realms. They employ agency within the structural framework provided by their gender roles, socially
constructing their behavior so it accords with the impressions they seek to achieve popularity among their peers.” (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992, p. 185).

As a product of its time, this particular study is reviewed here in some detail. It clearly focused on the existing social structure, paying relatively little attention to cross-gender behavior. It did report that “effeminate” boys in the study were sometimes referred to as “fag”, “sissy”, or “homo”. Also, in their conclusions, the authors noted a “slight historical shift” in gender roles for girls, adding: “Such a cross-over among boys into ‘feminine’ areas was less acceptable, however, and still negatively sanctioned”. (Adler, Kless, & Adler, 1992, p. 185).

A more recent study of gender socialization, based on social-cognitive theory (related to social constructionism) specifically examined the effects of peer victimization on gender non-conformity (Ewing Lee & Troop-Gordon, 2011). This study of 5th grade students found that victimization had a differential impact on non-conforming girls versus boys. Thus, the girls tended to withdraw from all activities, “masculine” or “feminine”, following either overt victimization or social exclusion. The gender non-conforming boys, on the other hand, showed a decrease in “feminine” behaviors after overt peer victimization, but an increase in these behaviors when victimized through social exclusion. This research demonstrated the need “....to explicate the mechanisms leading to increased, or decreased, adherence to gender norms in connection to peer experiences.” (Ewing Lee & Troop-Gordon, 2011, 209).

As the literature indicates, social constructionism helped shift views on gender away from purely essentialist (biological) conceptions. Thus, even though research had suggested certain early gender differences, such as an early tendency toward gender-based preferences in social play (see LaFreniere, 2011, for a review), interest was now growing with respect to the interaction between cognitive and environmental variables (such as teacher practices) in the development of young children’s gender stereotypes. For example, an experimental study by Bigler (1995) regarding the explicit use of gender categories in an elementary classroom setting
(e.g. grouping by gender, referring to individual students as member of a gender category) showed: “Children who were placed in an environment that made frequent use of gender dichotomies, especially those children with less advanced classification skills, showed significantly less flexible responding on multiple measures of gender stereotyping.” (Bigler, 1995, p. 1084).

Much feminist research also had started to move away from essentialist conceptualizations of gender. For instance, Reay (2001) applied a feminist framework in her case study of an English primary classroom, describing multiple gender identities constructed through interaction of the variables of race, class, and sexuality. Yet, in spite of this diversity, most identities (even the “tomboys”) reinforced the binary system of gender categorization as well as the masculine hegemony. In this study, only the assertive “spice girls” were sometimes able to disrupt the existing power relationships by their “....attempts to invert regular processes of gender objectification” (Reay, 2001, p. 161), at the risk of disapproval by their teachers.

While the relativism inherent in social constructionism caused a decline in theories of essentialism, it also spawned, paradoxically, a burgeoning in identity politics. As explained by Gergen (2001):

Constructionist critique was enormously appealing to many groups whose voices had been marginalized by science, and to all those whose pursuits of social equality and justice were otherwise thwarted by existing authorities of truth. Constructionist arguments not only served to level the playing field, but also opened the door to broadscale political and moral critique. (Gergen, 2001, p. 8).

However, as Gergen also pointed out, the essentialism and moralism of identity politics were, in the long run, incompatible with a social constructionist perspective. This notion, along with an observed decline in the efficacy of identity politics, led him to suggest that the time had come for “relational” conceptions of self and of social discourse (Gergen, 2001, pp. 174-182).
Such sentiments could also be found in postmodern feminist writings, such as those of Judith Butler, who suggested that women do not make up a monolithic group. In her words:

To prescribe an exclusive identification for a multiply constituted subject, as every subject is, is to enforce a reduction and a paralysis, and some feminist positions, including my own, have problematically prioritized gender as the identificatory site of political mobilization at the expense of race or sexuality or class or geopolitical positioning/displacement. (Butler, 1993, p. 78).

Butler (1990, 1993) described gender and sex as “performative” rather than essential, constructed within the constraints of social norms, but with the potential for agency (or “resistance”) on the part of the self (or subject, in postmodern language). In later work, Butler (2004) elaborated on the notion that performativity may both reinforce and subvert gender norms. She also wrote extensively about transsexuality and its relationship to feminism, as in these passages:

Although some feminists have worried in public that the trans movement constitutes an effort to displace or appropriate sexual difference, I think that this is only one version of feminism, one that is contested by views that take gender as an historical category, that the framework for understanding how it works is multiple and shifts through time and place. (….)

To understand gender as a historical category, however, is to accept that gender, understood as one way of culturally configuring a body, is open to a continual remaking, and that “anatomy” and “sex” are not without cultural framing (as the intersex movement has clearly shown). The very attribution of femininity to female bodies as if it were a natural or necessary property takes place within a normative framework in which the assignment of femininity to femaleness is one mechanism for the production of gender itself. (Butler, 2004, 9/10).
Butler's theoretical conception of gender (and sexuality) as flexible and relational, along with her explicit denial of feminism as essentialist and her rejection of identity politics, made her one of the founders of Queer theory.

**Queer Theory and Heteronormativity**

As a reaction against gender and sex stereotypes, as well as against notions of group identity (including distinct gay and lesbian subcultures), Queer theory started to make its advance in academic circles beginning in the eighties, coinciding with the emergence of sexual (bisexual, BDSM) and transgender minorities and combining political forces with the AIDS activists of ACT UP (Jagose, 1996). Queer theory proposes that gender and sexual identity are personal, fluid, and span a continuum (Jagose, 1996; Sullivan, 2003). In fact, as part of Queer theory, the very idea of “identity” comes under scrutiny, as described in this statement:

> Access to the post-structuralist theories of identity as provisional and contingent, coupled with a growing awareness of the limitations of identity categories in terms of political representation, enable queer to emerge as a new form of personal identification and political organization. (Jagose, 1996; 77/78).

Queer theory not only conceptualizes gender identity as relational, flexible and non-binary, but also as embedded in a particular power dynamic (Renold, 2004), based on the values of “heteronormativity” (Warner, 1991, p. 14). Given the framework of heteronormativity, ideals of femininity and masculinity are linked to the norm of heterosexual relationships (Butler, 1993, p. 176). This reinforcement of an oppressive process of social categorization and the continuous silencing of alternative ways to think about and express gender and sexuality, are at the heart of Queer theory's critique. Queer politics have not necessarily accommodated all who looked to it for a radical transformation in our notions of gender (see Stryker, 2004, 2008) or satisfied all those who advocate structural social change (see Kirsch, 2000). However, the relevance of Queer theory as a foundation for social work practice with transgender individuals has been noted.
elsewhere (see Burdge, 2007), and its applicability to the issue of gender variance in schools continues to be explored.

**Heteronormativity and Education**

There is now a considerable literature with respect to the heteronormative character of educational institutions. Some of this literature focuses on the manifestations of outright homophobia and the resulting discrimination and harassment against members of the LGBTQ community, particularly at the secondary level (Gretyak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009; Pascoe, 2007; Russell et al., 2011; Smith, 1998; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012; Wyss, 2004; GLSEN, 2009; Phoenix, Frosh, & Pattman, 2003). For example, Smith (1998), in his “institutional ethnography” (p. 310) of a Canadian high school, describes four recurring, language-based forms of social organization that create and support the heterosexist and homophobic school environment:

1. Identifying a “fag” as a stigmatized object through gossip and bathroom graffiti;
2. organizing anti-gay violence through name calling (leading to ostracism, harassment, and – ultimately – physical violence);
3. promoting this ideology (again via bathroom graffiti; also through jokes and stereotypical boy-girl talk);
4. silence (the absence of language) on the part of school administrators, which condones the abuse and violence by default.

Smith notes how, in reaction to this hostile environment, the participants in his study often began to develop a “gay consciousness” (part of an “internal dialogue”), sometimes alongside a concern with “passing” as heterosexual in the outside world (Smith, 1998, pp. 321-324).

Wyss (2004) conducted interviews and used e-mail questionnaires to learn about the experiences of school-based abuse in a purposeful sample of transgender and genderqueer ninth to twelve graders (and self-identified victims of physical and sexual violence at school) in the United States. The reported effects of such abuse include pervasive feelings of fear, dread,
anxiety, depression, shame, and powerlessness, as well as decreased self-esteem, school failure, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts. Additionally, and similar to the Smith (1998) study, Wyss reports somewhat of a mixed bag in terms of the more cognitive-behavioral results of the violence. Thus, while finding “choice and agency” in attempts to balance concerns for safety with an authentic sense of self (seemingly similar to the consciousness-raising process described by Smith), the article also notes that some of the respondents needed to “go back in the closet” (p. 722; much like the students in the Smith study became increasingly concerned about “passing”).

Other articles and studies provide a picture of the more subtle nature of heteronormativity in terms of its silencing of gender and sexual minorities, including at the elementary and early childhood levels (Blaise, 2005; Davidson, 2006; DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Epstein, 1997; Puchner & Klein, 2011; Renold, 2004; Renold, 2005; Surtees & Gunn, 2010). As an example, Renold’s (2004) aforementioned article describes an ethnographic study of boys in an English primary school. Her study focused on the question of what happens to boys who resist the dominant culture of masculinity and was informed, very specifically, by feminist and Queer theory. With regard to her findings, Renold found that a surprisingly large proportion of the boys she studied actually resisted the dominant masculine culture. These were studious, compliant boys, who were not terribly interested in sports or in the popular styles of clothing. In queer terminology, they were “doing other”, using such strategies as humor, locating “safe spaces”, and finding like-minded peers. However, as Renold points out, they also helped maintain heteronormativity by, at times, stating an exaggerated dislike of “feminine” play, either out of fear of sanctions by the dominant group or because of envy of the latitude in gender expression given to the girls. (Renold, 2004, p. 261).

In reviewing the literature on heteronormativity in schools (mostly qualitative studies informed by Queer theory), a number of themes emerge. Striking is the documented strength and resilience among gender-variant youth, and their quest for authenticity, even under trying conditions. For example, the students interviewed by Gutierrez (2004) reject the “transgender”
label given to them (so they can attend an alternative high school for LGBT-identified students) as offensive, “Like a cartoon or something.” (p. 72). They also demonstrate just how confounding the issues of identity can become, as illustrated by this quote from one of the students: “If she [my girlfriend] considers herself a male, then I would consider myself a female, and she considers herself a male. But, since she considers herself as a female, I consider myself as a lesbian.” (p. 73). Furthermore, in terms of their schooling, these students appear to have a common vision of inclusion, of which this statement is representative: “I want a school where everyone is equal, is accepted (….). And one class I would really want to be there is gender studies, because a lot of people don't really know about gender.” (Gutierrez, 2004; p. 77).

In a narrative case study, Davidson (2006) examines how the fluidity in gender and sexual identification helps a bisexual Latino high school student “....challenge peer heterosexism and social heteronormativity” (p. 14), while quietly “....reconstructing and expressing a more feminine masculinity.” (p. 22). Interestingly, this subtle, yet assertive approach at subverting heteronormativity appears to be a feature of resilience among gender-variant youth in the other Queer-informed studies cited here. The Davidson study provides a good example of the application of Queer theory in foregrounding “difference” as positive. As the author puts it:

Men on the fringes of gender expression find that their authenticity pushes against boundaries, thereby enriching the potential of larger society. In crossing boundaries, they become fluent in expressing the nuances and subtleties inherent in complex combinations and synthesis of culture, language, and identity. (Davidson, 2006, p. 24).

Another interesting finding emerging from this review of studies related to heteronormativity in schools is the observation that the ability of gender-variant students to “pass” (i.e. to not stand out as different) in certain settings and at certain times is an apparent survival skill, as well as a distinct component of resilience when paired with the continuing quest for authenticity (for example Smith, 1998, and Wyss, 2004). This necessary duality, resistance
alternating with conformity, was even observed at the elementary level (Renold, 2004, 2005).

Finally, a third theme that emerged from this review was found in the studies of school personnel and teacher training, namely the perpetuation of heteronormativity (Puchner & Klein, 2011) and heterosexism or homophobia (Wickens & Sandlin, 2010) by those who are or will be in charge of the classrooms, a theme of particular relevance to the topic of this paper. Of note also is the correlational link between gender role expectations and homophobia suggested by an older, exploratory study of early childhood education teachers (Cahill & Adams, 1997). This study found that the teachers were generally open to nontraditional gender role socialization of their young students, but were less accepting of cross-gender behavior in boys than in girls. Furthermore, the relative lack of acceptance of this behavior in boys appeared to be related to negative attitudes toward gay men. The investigators concluded, in words that still seem to apply today:

The constructs of gender identity formation, gender role development, and sexuality are all foundational in the pursuit of expanding our understanding of child development, yet are rarely discussed in the field of early childhood education. One implication suggested by this study is that teacher preparation programs should include an exploration of the relationships and intersections of these constructs. One reason that these topics are rarely discussed may be that we do not perceive children as sexual beings, or we assume heterosexuality as the expected development unless something occurs such as an observation of nontraditional gender behavior. (Cahill & Adams, 1997, p. 526).

Social Workers and “Queer Consciousness”

Since this chapter is meant to provide context for a proposed study concerning the perspectives of school social workers on gender variance, and given the lack of existing data in that respect, it is informative as well to consider previous research into a related topic, i.e. the attitudes of those in the social work profession regarding sexual minorities. The earliest such
study of MSW-level social workers was conducted in Columbus, Ohio, and found that almost one third of the sample scored in the homophobic range on the Index of Attitudes toward Homosexuals (Wisniewski & Toomey, 1987). Ten years later, findings from a national study of graduate-level NASW members showed homophobia in ten percent of the participants and heterosexism (i.e. the view that heterosexuality is somehow superior in terms of sexual orientation) among more than half the sample (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997). A recent survey exploring “queer consciousness” among a sample of NASW members with MSW degrees found mostly positive attitudes toward lesbians and gays, but relatively little interest in “resisting traditional sex and gender roles” (Martinez, Barskey, and Singleton, 2011, p. 308).

Research has also been done with regard to the attitudes of social work students. A survey of undergraduate social work students at a Midwestern university found them to be more positive toward gays and lesbians than undergraduate students in other fields (Cluse-Tolar, Lambert, Ventura, & Pasapuleti, 2004). A recent survey of a large sample of undergraduate and graduate students at a Southeastern university, a majority of whom were students in social work or other helping professions, found a sizeable proportion (44%) of them to score in the “moderately” or “highly biased” range (Scott, Siebert, Siebert, and Chodony, 2012). Social work faculty in the United States and English-speaking Canada have also been surveyed regarding their attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities and their support for LGBT content in the social work curriculum (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Woodford, Luke, & Gutierrez, 2011). This study found strong support for content related to lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, but less support for inclusion of content related to the oppression of these populations (heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia), and less yet for content regarding transgender people or transphobia.

Finally, it should be noted that even positive attitudes do not necessarily translate into practices that are affirming to gay, lesbian or transgender clients (see Hardman, 1997; Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004; Crisp, 2006). Overall, the available data suggest progress coupled with “significant room for improvement” (Martinez et al., 2011, p. 307) regarding more subtle
attitudes and “queer consciousness”.

**Research Question**

As reviewed here, the literature is clear about the links between the issues of gender identity, masculine hegemony, and heteronormativity. From a feminist perspective in particular, masculine hegemony, the forces that maintain it, and the emerging dynamics that undermine it are worthy of continued research. However, in order to maintain a clear focus, the topic for further exploration suggested here concerns the phenomenon of gender variance in the heteronormative setting of public education. A recent retrospective study of GID clinic patients in Japan (Terada et al., 2012) illustrates the importance of considering the school context. This particular study found a very high prevalence of self-reported school refusal (defined as being absent for thirty days or more in a given school year for reasons not related to illness or economics). The school refusal rate of 29.2% in the sample of 579 patients with GID compared to a rate of 1-2% in Japanese elementary and secondary students generally. Moreover, the study found a significant correlation between school refusal on the one hand, and limited academic achievement and unemployment on the other. While the researchers acknowledge the study's limitations in terms of sampling and measurement, it clearly raises a red flag about the school functioning of students with gender identity disorder, and – one may suspect – all gender-variant youth. Although the literature contains some conceptual and prescriptive pieces about how to respond to gender-nonconforming students (Haldeman, 2000; Kenegy, Moses, & Ornstein, 2006; Brill & Pepper, 2008; Vanderburgh, 2009), only a couple of studies have investigated the perceptions or actual experiences of school personnel regarding manifestations of gender variance in American schools (Luecke, 2011; Payne and Smith, 2014). Given the increased visibility of gender-variant youth, this is clearly an area in need of further exploration.

Within public school settings, school social workers have a special role regarding students' social-emotional growth and well-being, in terms of individual as well as institutional interventions. Arguably, the issue of person-environment fit is at the core of the social work
profession. Moreover, the social work Code of Ethics emphasizes “cultural competence and
social diversity”, including diversity in terms of “gender identity or expression” (NASW, 2008,
1.05 (c)). On the other hand, the notion of gender variance in children may not be easily
accommodated by the cognitive frameworks and moral value systems of individual social
workers, and it is not at all clear how these workers might incorporate personal views on gender
variance into their own paradigm of practice with diverse populations.

The issue of gender variance is probably most controversial with regard to the
manifestation of this phenomenon in young children. As noted, the number of known gender-
variant children appears to be on the rise. It may be argued that educational efforts at increasing
acceptance of these children would be most effective in the early grades. And while public
elementary schools do not typically provide opportunities for the discussion of gender and
sexuality, it could be suggested that school social workers ought to play a part in facilitating that
discussion. Again, however, there are no published studies that have examined this issue from the
perspective of the social work professionals in the field.

The literature review and the knowledge gaps identified above prompt the following
research question: “How does the heteronormative environment of public education affect the
perceptions, attitudes, and self-reported practices of a sample of school social workers in the
Northeastern United States with respect to gender variance?” Subquestion: “How are the
perceptions, attitudes and practices of the social workers in this sample mediated by professional
and personal experiences?”

**Queer Theory and “Virtue Ethics” as a Theoretical Framework**

The present study utilized concepts derived from a more general social theory, as well as
from applied practice theory in the field of counseling. In terms of the former, the silencing of
alternative expressions of sexuality and gender is a concept subsumed under the larger construct
of heteronormativity proposed by Queer theory, as is the notion of a dominant binary system of
gender categorization. Both of these concepts (silencing and gender binary) helped guide the data
collection and data analysis. Their relevance to the study has been described previously in this chapter.

With respect to the application of practice theory, data collection and analysis was based on several notions related to multicultural competence (or competence in working with diverse populations). A specific model for school social work with transgender students has been suggested by Kenegy, Moses, and Ornstein (2006), based on three stages of multicultural competency described by Swigonski (1995) and Pederson (1988): Awareness, knowledge, and skill. This model is similar to a practice model for social work with sexual minorities suggested by Van Den Bergh and Crisp (2004). In terms of school social work with transgender students, Kenegy, Moses, and et al. suggest awareness of one's “own biases”, “knowledge from the standpoint of transgender people”, and skill in helping “these students negotiate with the school environment....” (Kenegy, Moses, & Ornstein, 2006, pp. 52/53).

A more general model regarding cultural competence in psychological counseling has been proposed by Fowers and Davidov (2006). This model, based on “virtue ethics”, has relevance to social work practice with gender-variant children because it requires deep personal engagement, as well as an affective response to issues of diversity. Fowers and Davidov state that cultural competence is not simply the possession of self-knowledge, information about culture, and behavioral capacities that may or may not alter the psychologist as a person. Rather, one must internalize and embody this knowledge in a profound way, making it part of one's character, not just an addition to one's behavioral repertoire” (p. 588).

Referring to the “practical wisdom” required to engage effectively and sensitively in multicultural settings, they note that such wisdom grows out of affective as well as cognitive engagement with our circumstances, because adequate interpretations of situations are often only possible when we have certain feelings, whether these emotions are compassion, anger, love, or revulsion. Our
emotional reactions help to mark out and define the ethically salient features of the situation. (Fowers & Davidov, p. 591).

Consideration of affect, engagement, and transformation as components of a practice model seems appropriate in the context of a counter-normative phenomenon such as gender variance in children. Therefore, given the focus of the study reported on here, the notions of awareness, search for understanding through affective engagement, and openness to change on the part of the practitioner became additional theoretical guideposts for data collection and analysis.

Finally, in terms of this study’s framework, I should be noted that another theoretical construct, homonormativity (Stryker, 2004, 2008), emerged as relevant during the study. Chapter 5 (Findings) discusses this notion further, describing also how its significance became clear in the context of data collection and analysis.
CHAPTER 4

Design and Methods of the Study

After restating the research question, this chapter outlines the process by which the current study was designed. It also describes specific design features, the study’s sample, and the methods of data collection and data analysis. Special attention is given to a discussion of the intent to achieve consistency between the theoretical framework of the research and its subsequent design and methodology. Similar to the brief autobiographical/personal section in the Introduction, this Design and Methods chapter is written as a first-person narrative. Again, this is consistent with the use of “personal voice” in qualitative research (Patton, 2002, p. 64) and an attempt to reduce the distance between researcher, participant, and audience. It is also an explicit acknowledgement of the subjective nature of study design.

Restating the Research Question

The rationale for the specific research question around which this study was built has already been described in the chapter regarding the theoretical framework. However, I want to restate it here, as context for a discussion about the study’s design and methodology. Thus, the research question was: “How does the heteronormative environment of public education affect the perceptions, attitudes, and self-reported practices of a sample of school social workers in the Northeastern United States with respect to gender variance?” Subquestion: “How are the perceptions, attitudes and practices of the social workers in this sample mediated by professional and personal experiences?” It may be noted that I used the adjective “heteronormative” deliberately, based on extant research (see the discussion of this study’s theoretical framework in chapter 3).

Design of the Study

As the literature review in chapter two shows, the area of gender variance among youth is vast and largely unexplored. In designing the proposed study, feasibility and relevance were of
utmost concern, as were transparency and internal consistency (see Yardley, 2000, for a discussion of credibility in qualitative research). Hence, I focused on a fairly circumscribed domain, within which I would be able to find data with clear social work implications. In the words of Hugh McLaughlin:

Social work is a practice discipline, and it is incumbent upon those who see themselves as social work researchers to consider how their research can be translated into behaviours to actively support practice. This does not mean that pure research is eschewed but that it is used to promote understanding and to act as a springboard for applied research and practice.” (McLaughlin, 2007, pp. 178/179).

Given the lack of research about young transgender students, it seemed that this topic would need to be explored by way of a qualitative research design, collecting rich data on the ground and linking them to relevant theoretical notions. Within the domain of qualitative research, I tried to conceptualize a number of different approaches (see Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002).

Initially, it appeared to me that much (if not all) of the data would need to come from interviews, since the phenomena I was interested in would be difficult to observe and would most likely not be recorded in existing documents. Because of my focus on the response from school personnel, I considered a phenomenological study, inquiring about the “lived experience” of school social workers in terms of heteronormativity, gender socialization, and gender variance in public education. However, as I started to develop an interview protocol, it became obvious that I was interested not only in experiences, but also in perceptions and attitudes, perceived knowledge and skills, ethics and personal feelings. While seemingly broad-ranging, my draft questions were focused on a specific slice of professional practice and not open-ended enough to suggest a purely phenomenological interview.

Subsequently, I explored the idea of a case study approach, centered around a school
social worker dealing with a clearly identified issue of gender variance. However, given the sensitive nature of the research topic, issues of access and confidentiality loomed large, issues which also have been noted in terms of school-based studies regarding sexual orientation (Donelson & Rogers, 2004). Moreover, due to the relative intrusiveness of a case study approach, I was concerned about the ethics of letting others deal with the potential fall-out of my research after data collection had been completed. Thus, logistical and ethical problems inspired a fresh look at ways to address my research questions.

After further reading and consultation, Patton's description of “orientational” research (Patton, 2002, 129-131) seemed to fit the purpose, theoretical framework, and preferred data collection method envisioned for my study. Commenting on the role of critical theory in this kind of research, Patton notes:

Within any of these theoretical or ideological orientations one can undertake qualitative inquiry, but the focus of inquiry is determined by the framework within which one is operating and findings are interpreted and given meaning from the perspective of that preordinate theory. Such qualitative inquiry, therefore, aims to describe and explain specific manifestations of already-presumed general patterns. Such inquiry is aimed at confirmation and elucidation, rather than discovery. (Patton, 2002, 131).

Thus, along the lines of “orientational” research, I designed a study aimed at elucidating an emerging practice issue for school social workers: gender variance in young children. The study attempts to uncover data on the levels of both personal and theoretical meaning. I describe this two-tiered process more fully in the section on data analysis.

The Sample

For this study, I utilized a number of strategies to recruit the sample of school social workers. Recruitment turned out to be relatively difficult. Several proposal modifications had to be approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board in order to expand the strategies for
recruitment and arrive at the desired sample size. Eventually, the strategies included:

- In-person outreach at a state-wide school social work conference;
- a flyer attached to e-mail messages from officials of the American Association of School Social Workers, addressed to members of a regional chapter of that organization;
- in-person outreach at meetings of two county-wide “school-community partnerships”;
- direct e-mail messages to school social workers whose contact information was available on the websites of 18 school districts (urban, suburban, and rural) in a contiguous region in the northeastern United States;
- snowball sampling.

All strategies avoided recruitment via administrators. Instead, direct access or access with the help of peers was employed in order to facilitate equity during the data collection process (see, for example, Seidman, 2006; pp. 45/46). A $20 gift card, which I paid for myself, was promised to all participants as a token of appreciation. Also, as a means of thanking officials of the state affiliate of the American Association of Social Workers (who facilitated access to their membership), I committed myself to provide a workshop on gender variance, free of charge, at a future conference of that organization.

Eventually, my recruitment efforts resulted in a sample of fourteen school social workers (the original proposal had called for twelve), practicing in thirteen different schools. The sample can be characterized as purposeful and fairly homogeneous (all social workers in public schools). The schools in which the participating social workers practiced at the time of data collection span the grade levels of public education and cut across a variety of settings. Specifically, four of the participants worked in urban elementary schools (k-6), one had a split position between a pre-k/k building and a 1-8 school (both in an urban district), two worked in k-8 city schools, three in urban middle schools (grades 5-8 and 7-8), one in a city high school (9-12), one in a suburban elementary school (k-4), one in a “rural-suburban” elementary school (k-5), and one in a suburban middle school (grades 6-8). Information about the participants' educational and
employment history and about training experiences specific to the research topic were explored in detail during the data collection process, pieces of which are reported in various sections of chapter 5 (Findings and Discussion).

Given feedback on draft versions of the study’s proposal, I gave considerable thought to the suggestion of including interview questions related to possibly relevant personal/demographic variables (such as approximate age, self-identified gender, race/ethnicity, religious and political beliefs) in an effort to analyze their intersectionality with the issues of gender and sexuality. Such an approach has obvious value. Nevertheless, in line with Queer theory’s opposition to fixed identity categories, I opted for an alternative open-ended format for self-identification, which aimed to elicit an “authentic profile” without imposing pre-conceived parameters. Thus, participants were asked to describe aspects of their identity that they considered important in terms of their relationships and interactions with other people, and to their work (see appendix A). In the end, I did decide to ask participants to also complete a 2-item demographic questionnaire (see appendix G), assigning themselves a given age range and gender identification (female, male, or “other” with option to elaborate). However, these two pieces of information were collected only for aggregate purposes (to be able to describe and compare the sample) and were not related to any other responses. They did show that the sample was somewhat younger than the population of all licensed social workers in the United States (based on the latest available figures; Center for Health Workforce Studies and NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006): Almost two thirds of the sample reported to be under the age of 45, compared to slightly more than one third of all social workers. Also, 100% of the sample self-identified as female, compared to 81% of the national population (although this latter percentage is higher among the groups under age 45; the table in appendix B provides some additional detail of these comparisons). Again: Since, as a qualitative study, this particular research is not concerned with generalizable findings, these figures are reported here solely for descriptive purposes and not as an indication of the relevance of age or self-identified gender.
Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through individual interviews, begun during the fall of 2012 and continued into the spring of 2013. The interview approach is consistent with much qualitative research on schooling. In the words of Seidman (2006): “If the researcher's goal, however, is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry.” (p. 11).

Given the somewhat sensitive nature of the research topic and the focus on a rather circumscribed aspect of school social work practice, the individual interviews were based on a semi-structured format (see appendix F). This format facilitated close scrutiny by the dissertation committee and the Institutional Review Board, while also aiding the data analysis process (see Patton, 2002, pp. 344-346). The interview questions covered participants' experiences with and perceptions of gender socialization and gender variance in the school that they work in, and their assessment of the school's climate in terms of diversity, including sexual and gender issues. The questions also asked about the respondents' attitudes toward gender-variant behavior in general and about their views of the social worker's role in supporting and advocating for gender-nonconforming students. Additionally, the interviews inquired about the participants' personal and professional experiences with gender variance (e.g. with family or friends, through professional training, etc.). The interview protocol had been thoroughly previewed by three “key informants” (two school social workers and one school psychologist) in separate sessions. The protocols were revised several times during this process, particularly to increase the clarity of the questions and to weed out or reword leading (biased) or potentially “off-putting” questions. Attention was also paid to the sequencing of the questions and to possible redundancy or omissions.

All participants were given a choice in selecting a site for the interview. Two of the interviews took place in office space at the University, the other twelve were conducted in the schools that the participants worked in, typically before or after classes. Each interview lasted
approximately one hour. I served as the sole interviewer in this study, which ensured consistency in the data collection process. All participants signed an informed consent form (see Appendix E) at the beginning of the interview, at which time they also had an opportunity to indicate if they wanted to receive a written summary of the study’s findings.

The original research proposal included a planned focus group of school social workers. In particular, I was interested in how the anticipated synergism between participants’ responses would illuminate how different ideas about gender variance are accepted or rejected (see Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007, pp. 42/43). While every effort was made to organize a small focus group, I eventually abandoned the idea due to logistical difficulties. As several participants expressed in their individual interviews, school social workers are typically overburdened with large caseloads, while often practicing in isolation of one another. Opportunities to get together and share ideas as a discipline appear quite limited. Although not being able to conduct the focus group constituted a minor loss in terms of the richness of the overall data, I think the findings that resulted from the individual interviews are no less significant for it.

Data Analysis

I used a two-stage process of data analysis, consisting of both inductive and deductive methods. The rationale for using this process is based on the goal of wanting to describe the participants' unique experiences and views, while also aiming to place these descriptions in a theoretical context. Such an approach to data analysis does not seem uncommon in the area of qualitative research. For example, while Patton states that “....inductive analysis is one of the primary characteristics of qualitative inquiry....”, he also notes that initial analysis is often deductive and theory-driven (Patton, 2002, p. 454). In this respect he refers to the difference between an analysis based on the researcher's “sensitizing concepts” and one guided by the “indigenous concepts” of the participants (Patton, 2002, pp. 454-457). Furthermore, Patton describes “analytic induction” as an approach to qualitative cross-case analysis that “....includes examining preconceived hypotheses, that is, without the pretense of the mental blank slate

Further support for the use of theoretical frameworks in qualitative research has been provided by Anfara and Mertz (2006), who described their use as the application of “lenses” in the exploration of phenomena. Similarly, even proponents of a constructivist approach to grounded theory acknowledge the role played by interpretation, context, and reflexivity in qualitative studies (see, for instance, Charmaz, 2006).

A specific model for the two-tiered approach to qualitative data analysis was articulated by Smith (1996) as an attempt to link phenomenology and psychological theory derived from traditional experimental approaches. This model of “interpretative phenomenological analysis” (IPA) has since been used quite extensively in British health psychology (see Brocki & Wearden, 2006) and, increasingly, in other areas of applied social sciences research (studies of mental health interventions and identity issues among them). Congruent with the present study, IPA typically uses small (n=1-15), purposive and rather homogeneous samples, and semi-structured interviews to collect the data. The interviews are analyzed through constant comparison for statements that seem to have significant meaning. Themes are coded and, eventually, chunked into broader categories or superordinate themes. Individual cases are then compared for recurrence of (superordinate) themes or lack thereof (Smith, Jarman, & Osborn, 1999).

I utilized a similar process of coding for the data obtained by my study, with “meaning” defined at both the deductive and inductive levels (also referred to by Smith as “critical” and “empathic engagement” with the data; Smith, 2004, p. 46). According to Patton’s (2002) categorization, this would roughly correspond with an analysis based on “sensitizing” versus “indigenous concepts”. While there appears to be some minor disagreement in the reviewed literature as to which type of analysis should be applied first, it turned out that, in terms of the study presented here, data analysis moved smoothly back and forth between the two levels.

With regard to the theory-driven, “critical”, and deductive phase of the data analysis for the current study, I used a number of sensitizing concepts as guidelines for examining the
participants' descriptions of experiences, perceptions, and attitudinal references. These include “individual work setting” (A), the normative “gender binary” (B), “gender variance” (C), and the “silencing of differences in sexuality or gender” (D). Regarding the participants' professional role, the sensitizing concepts would be “search for understanding” (E) and “awareness of self in relation to the topic” (F). The letter codes in parentheses also map onto the specified context and concepts in the research question (A=social work setting, B and D = heteronormativity, C = gender variance, E and F = social work practice). The concurrent inductive analysis of the data provided additional insights and led to the examination of an unanticipated “indigenous concept” (counter-normative gender expression as an indicator of sexual orientation), discussed in the chapter regarding the study’s findings.

Since I was not only the sole interviewer for this study, but also transcribed all fourteen interviews myself, I became intimately familiar with the data. Throughout the transcription and data analysis process, I employed the technique of memo-writing, most commonly associated with grounded theory (see Charmaz, 2006, pp. 72-94), but equally applicable to this study. These memos were both analytical and self-reflective, and became part of the process record of the research. As stated by Charmaz: “Memos catch your thoughts, capture the comparisons and connections you make, and crystallize questions and directions to pursue. Through conversing with yourself while memo-writing, new ideas and insights arise during the act of writing.” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 72). It was this technique in particular that aided the more inductive data analysis.

In sum: Data analysis followed the basic elements of the IPA model described above. The model includes both inductive and deductive procedures, but allows for flexibility in their application to specific data. IPA has also been described as “strongly idiographic” (Smith, 2004, p. 41), examining multiple cases for aspects of convergence and divergence, rather than for their generalizable features. This overall approach was adhered to in the present study. Thus, each individual transcript was read through several times and coded according to the previously
described “sensitizing concepts” derived from the study’s theoretical framework. In addition, a process of “constant comparison” was used to discover instances of convergence and divergence between cases, as well as new categories of information (“indigenous concepts”). This total immersion in the data resulted in the themes and subthemes identified in the next chapter regarding the study’s findings.
CHAPTER 5

Findings and Discussion

Unlike qualitative research using “grounded theory” or other purely inductive perspectives, this study employed a combination of inductive and deductive approaches, based on the previously discussed model of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (see chapter on Design and Methods). IPA is compatible with both the “orientational” design of the study and its theoretical framework. Thus, the analysis conducted for this study accommodated the examination of themes and subthemes related to the constructs of heteronormativity and virtue ethics, as well as the discovery of any emerging themes.

Consideration of the construct of heteronormativity led to two broad themes: 1. The binary view of gender, and 2. the silencing of differences in terms of gender and sexuality. Mindful of the objectives of orientational research, (“confirmation and elucidation”; Patton, 2002, p. 131), this chapter shows that the two themes just mentioned were replete in the data, elucidating and confirming previous characterizations of public education as heteronormative. However, subthemes explore how greater overall diversity seems to enable the increasing visibility of gender-variant youth within the binary system.

The construct of virtue ethics provided another theoretical anchor for both data collection and data analysis, in that it was translated as a “way of being” (cognitively and emotionally) that would enable social workers to navigate institutional heteronormativity on behalf of marginalized clients. Measurement of this construct was considered essential in order to answer the research question of how school social workers view and respond to gender variance. In this respect, the data confirm and elucidate manifestations of this theme and related subthemes in terms of the social workers’ understanding, attitudes and practices.

An unanticipated theme emerged from the more inductive analysis of the data, performed through a process of “constant comparison” between the various social worker interviews. This
theme concerned the frequent interpretation of gender expression as an indicator of sexual identity, without regard for gender identity. I labeled this theme “the misinterpretation of gender variance”. Theoretically, it can be related to the construct of homonormativity (Stryker, 2004, 2008), which in turn can be seen as a corollary to heteronormativity. This will be discussed further in the pages that follow. Thus, in sum, the analysis of the findings will consider the following themes and subthemes:

- **THE IMPACT OF THE GENDER BINARY**
  - **The cycle of gender socialization and the gender binary** – Typical patterns of gender socialization in school settings reinforce the gender binary.
  - **Increased overall diversity as prerequisite for the emergence of gender variance**
    - School settings that are more diverse on variables like class and race also are more accommodating of emerging manifestations of gender variance.
  - **Manifestations of gender variance in a binary context** – Gender-variant students are becoming more known and visible in public schools. Often, social workers see gender-variant youth as victims of bullying, sometimes they are described as “odd” (or “on the spectrum”). However, confident students seem to stake out a space of their own. Also, “masculine girls” appear to fare better than “feminine boys”.

- **THE SILENCING OF DIFFERENCES**
  - **Talking about gender is like talking about sex** – Gender identity becomes linked with sexual identity and thus public school personnel typically talk about neither. Caution regarding parental backlash prevails.
  - **The minimal response to “so gay…”** – Consequences, if any, are punitive and follow-up is rarely educational. To talk about it too much is….like talking about sex (see above). Paradoxically, homophobic put-downs seem to be heard more often in school environments that are relatively accepting of gender variance (i.e. city schools).
• VIRTUE ETHICS IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE WITH GENDER-VARIANT STUDENTS

➢ Social workers making sense of gender variance – Gender variance is typically viewed as a biological phenomenon, but it is often confused with sexual orientation.

➢ The social work response to gender variance – School social workers are sympathetic to the plight of gender-variant students and want to be advocates for them, in spite of heteronormative pushback. However, a lack of understanding about gender identity may reduce their effectiveness.

➢ Steps to understanding and engagement – When becoming aware of their limited knowledge of gender identity and gender variance, social workers want to learn more.

• THE MISINTERPRETATION OF GENDER VARIANCE –

Social workers’ interpretation of non-normative gender expression as a typical manifestation of homosexuality limits the acknowledgement and discussion of gender variance and its potential to disrupt oppressive forms of social categorization.

This chapter will discuss the findings according to the themes and subthemes outlined above, illustrating them with relevant quotations from the interviews. The idiographic nature of the analysis suggested the need to complement descriptive and interpretative comments with frequent and sometimes extensive quotes from the individual interviews, since they provide the desired richness of data and increase the credibility of the study. The inclusion of many verbatim quotes is also consistent with Queer theory’s appreciation of the voice of research participants, unadulterated by excessive interpretation.

Please note that the names of all participants interviewed for this study have been changed. Furthermore, any personally identifying information has been deleted during the transcription process. As previously described, the interviews for this study followed a semi-
structured format (i.e. set questions, with the possibility of further probes). However, in reality, they were also conversations between professionals from the same discipline. Moreover, the topic was novel, inviting reflection and speculation. Consequently, the responses to the interview questions were often stream-of-consciousness-like, rather than tersely worded statements. An attempt was made to preserve that character of the interviews by not forcing conventions of grammar onto the transcripts. Instead, a dotted line is used to indicate brief pauses and connect the verbal responses as they were made. Also, dots between parentheses (…) indicate that passages were deleted because they would have jeopardized anonymity or because they became too expansive.

**THEME #1 – THE IMPACT OF THE GENDER BINARY**

One aim of this study was to learn about the participants’ views on gender variance in the school setting. From the responses it became clear that the dominance of a rigid gender binary is a huge factor inhibiting the manifestation of gender variance. In turn, this gender binary appears to be maintained by the various forces that make up the process of gender socialization, both in and out of school.

**SUBTHEME: THE CYCLE OF GENDER SOCIALIZATION AND THE GENDER BINARY**

As part of the interview, the social workers were asked for their observations as to what reinforces stereotypical gender socialization among students. Their views varied, but common responses included the influence of family, teachers, and peers. Connie (urban, k-8) stated:

It comes from the parents. I mean it's very evident from the parents, you know….
I've been in meetings where parents will say … just today…..”Don't cry…. stop crying, you are a boy”…. I have heard teachers, one teacher in particular, say “Stop crying…. you are not a girl….. boys don't cry”.

April (urban, pre-k through 8) said this about gender socialization:

Well, I think the kids get a lot of support with the very typical roles, you know….the boys get the message pretty quickly that they have to hide being upset, you know….they are much more comfortable fighting….there is a lot of fighting among the boys….I know that’s probably….maybe…. more natural, instinctively….but you don’t really want to be vulnerable, as a boy, I would say….so I think boys are pretty careful about that….they would rather be the hammer than the nail….they learn that pretty quickly….(…)…. we have some really good male role models in the school….our gym teacher in particular is very compassionate and builds really strong relationships with the kids…he is always there for them, that kind of stuff…but I think they get the message to kind of (inaudible)….you know, if there is a game and you get hurt, don’t cry about it…get up and get back in the swing of things….I still see plenty of that kind of stuff.

Asked about her observations of girls, April replied:

Well, it’s interesting…some of the girls……they are all kind of different….the girls definitely…. it feels like it’s a little bit more from home….maybe because there’s less males involved with some of these families, there’s less dads involved…but right when you said that, I pictured some girls come in, all gussied up in terms of like…. very much about their appearance, and pink ….and then I
think of some girls that are more like…. their sense of themselves is more naturally emerging….you know….they are not all primped….I can’t think of the best way to put it….. ….but I think the girls….you feel it a little bit more from the moms, I guess….

Susan (urban, middle school) also spoke of the home environment as a potentially important factor in her students’ identity development, adding that in some cases – boys in particular -- peers substitute for that home component:

Well the first thing that comes to mind ….and I’ll get to the school piece….. but the first thing that comes to mind for me is …I have a lot of young men on my caseload and I think that they struggle a lot more than the girls……with what it means to be a boy, and what it means to be a man, more importantly, because of the absence of a positive male figure in their life…. I really…. I think on my caseload, maybe five or six have dads that live at home…. that is staggering…. so I think that they struggle a lot with that…. with just, with what it means to be a man in this society ….and how you treat women…. and all the things that come along with the lessons that only men can teach to other men and young boys…. so I think they learn from their peers …. I think in this school, I think that the boys learn from each other that they need to be tough, that they need to fight to prove their masculinity….I think that that is part is what they learn here…. I just think they need to feel this sense of toughness, of you know, I don’t know what it is…. I’m struggling for words about this….but I think that here in this school…. at least that’s what I can speak to…. they need to feel powerful, and the way they feel powerful is in these groups or gangs….
Upon reflection, Susan expressed concerns about the girls’ socialization process as well:

How do they learn to become women? What is it like to be a girl in the school?

Well, you know of course…. this is all very generally speaking, it …. and I’m mostly thinking of my case load, and you have to keep in mind those are the tougher kids here…. but I think that sexualizing yourself gets you a long way in this environment…. the girls are just so overly sexualized about, you know, what they have already experienced as far as sexual things, whether they have witnessed it or have been involved in it, whatever the case may be …. I think that sometimes, that’s how they define their femininity or that’s who they think they are…. they don’t really see themselves beyond being something for boys to look at or for boys to be interested in…. so just as much, but in different ways, the girls struggle like the boys …. I’ve never really thought about it …. I am glad you bring that up, because it’s an important issue….

The social workers in elementary settings seemed to have a particular perspective on gender socialization. They talked about the shift to more gendered behavior as students move up through the grade levels, as can be heard in this statement from Cynthia (urban, elementary):

Yeah…. (sighs)…. you know, I really, I don’t know…. I mean, I’m always so happy when you go into the kindergarten room and you’ve got the kids, the boys who are doing role-play in the dress-up area or in the kitchen and with the dollhouses…. I think in kindergarten they are still able to do all that…. and even in some of my groups I’m able to do that with some of the younger kids, boy or
girl, it’s no big difference at all …. I think, well I think definitely sixth-grade, without a doubt is a huge change …. and it’s a recent change that we have six grade in the elementary school here…… but it makes such a big difference…. the girls talk about boys and the boys seem to be talking about girls…. the issues definitely come up…. the issue of sexuality definitely comes up in six grade …. whereas fifth grade and under, depending on the kids…. it might not come up …. but ,you know, I have some some real girly girls in some of my groups and…. I don’t know how…. third and fourth grade…. I don’t know how they learned how to be a real girly girl, but they love the sparkle, they love the stickers…. they love all that kind of stuff….. Monica (urban, elementary) also commented on the gradual shift to more gender-stereotyped play, noting that it would be difficult for a child to resist those expectations:

…. I mean, I think for the most part…. I think the primary classes, you know, try to have a mix of like different toys available to kids…. and I think you would see most primary kids kind of gravitating toward gender-specific type activities…. outside, you do see boys mostly being the more active ones…. they are the ones playing kickball and basketball…. the girls are usually the ones doing the more girl-like activities…. if they’re doing something active, it’s jump rope…. otherwise they’re just standing around, talking to each other, like girls do…. so I mean, it is hard…. if you’re a kid who has different feelings about things, I think it’s probably not an easy place to fit in, an elementary school. I think it comes from home, more than anything…. I think it comes from home…. I think they know what’s acceptable and what’s expected and they may follow that suit…. I
think it comes from peers too…. if they want to fit in with their peer group, they’re going to do things more along the expected lines…. (....) …. but I think….I think when the kids are younger, they would be more comfortable sort of crossing over with different activities that might be more or less acceptable for different, you know, gender biases….and as they get older I think it is probably a lot harder, to kind of do the things that you’re comfortable doing, with people that you’re comfortable doing them with….

Stacy (rural-suburban, elementary) had a somewhat different take on the developmental progression of genderized play behavior, describing early gender segregation based on socialization in the home:

…. (long pause)…. I think the…. when they first come into kindergarten you’ll see a little bit of segregation…. the girls tend to play with the girls, the boys tend to play with…. first, second, and third grade, there is much more of a blending on the playground. And then you’re getting into the fourth and fifth graders, who are much more aware of the differences, start noticing each other…. some of that uncomfortable…. so again you’ll see more of that segregation…. but I would say in the classrooms, in more structured settings, you see far less of that behavior and separation.

Interviewer: It’s interesting that they start out segregating before they begin interacting.

Stacy: Well, I think when they first come in you see a lot of the girlie-girl and boys-will-be boys behavior, and I think the boys don’t know what to do with the girls, and the girls don’t know what to do with the boys…. but then, as they grow
and develop, I think their interests become more meshed, if you will…. From her experience, Brenda (urban, elementary) noted that younger children cross gender boundaries quite easily in their spontaneous play, with the exception of two particular activities:

I think it’s much more accepted at a younger level…. and I think…. I think individuals might react more…. with more concern…. or to try, you know, try to steer a kid in a certain direction…. but I think overall, I would say my experience has been that it’s much more accepted at a younger age, you know…. and I usually just enforce developmental norms at this age…. what’s been interesting for me is seeing what kids play with in my room, when they are given that free opportunity…. it’s amazing…. it’s great, it’s great…. because I’m telling you, from kindergarten to eighth grade, kids in here will choose to play things that they never get a chance to play anywhere else…. Yes…. yes…. and I was thinking, just in terms of meeting with you, about what I see with play…. because what I do, I usually have…..I try to give kids at least ten minutes at the end of a session of independent play…. and they can…. if they are here on their own they can do it…. if they’re here in groups they can do it…. I don’t care what they choose to play with, it’s their time…. and the only thing I can think of…. and I’ve been trying to think of “what do I see kids not doing?”…. and the only thing I could say that I don’t see, from a gender-specific standpoint kids do…. I don’t see girls doing Legos…. that’s the only thing I could think of…. even younger, they don’t…. and it might be because of the opportunities to do other things…. if there were Legos and playdoh, or something, I might see it…. but because there is such
an opportunity to do so many different things… so that would be the one thing that I can tell you definitely…. the other thing is, boys are the only ones who play bank robber…. I’ve never had the girls play…. they [the boys] will literally go find a bag, put that money in it, and then they’ll be running around and they’ll…. so bank robber is definitely a male game, and Legos is also male…. I don’t see girls doing that….

Several of the social workers mentioned the influence of adult modeling as a factor in gender socialization, particularly for boys, as exemplified by this excerpt from the interview with Courtney (suburban, middle school):

Well, I think he is…. he is watching how his father acts…. or, if he doesn’t have a father, how does his mother relate to any men in her life…. uncles, grandfathers, older brothers…. and then…. chances are that he may not have had a male teacher until he gets to the middle school…. he might have, but then maybe not…. depending on which elementary school he went to…. when he gets to middle school he may have the first male teacher he has ever had…. and he sees a man dressed in a nice shirt and tie and pants, handle the classroom every day…. and he watches…. what are his mannerisms, how does he relate to the class, does he get angry, does he scold, does he lecture, does he joke around?…. you know…. how is he perceived by the community?…..we have some male teachers that are deeply loved…they are just like idolized by the school community…..and others that the kids don’t seem to relate to very well…. so, I don’t know…..

Susan (urban, middle school) also spoke of the importance of role models for her male
students:

…. and I think a lot of that [gang affiliation] forms because they don’t have positive male role models guiding them or helping them learn that this is not the route you need to go …you know, a lot of these young boys only have women in their lives …. they have female teachers or social workers, or moms or aunts or grandmas…. they get the message from them, but I don’t think it resonates as clearly or as effectively as if it were coming from a man, someone they could see and take after…. modeling is huge.

The issue of (male) role models also relates to the gender disparity among teachers mentioned in some of the interviews, as does the differential approach to discipline (with girls treated a little more sensitively). For example, Cynthia (urban, elementary) noted:

I mean…. well, we only have three male teachers, the rest are female teachers …. I guess…. do we treat boys differently than girls? I don’t know, I don’t know…. I do think boys are probably in trouble more than the girls …. although, some of the girls probably give the principal a run for his money…. but I don’t know …. the whole hitting thing …. (hesitates)…. I feel like, I do feel like…. ” if you hit a girl….”, you might still hear that from a teacher or from an aid in the lunch room…. like “What you’re doing? You never hit a girl!”…. Tracy (urban, middle school) also noted that disciplinary actions may differ depending on the gender of those involved:

Sometimes they might be a little more sensitive with girls than with the boys,
take more time …. I think it depends on your gender …. maybe men might be more sensitive to girl issues and just let them kind of handle it…. compared to when it's a boy to a boy…. then they kind of have their expectation as to how they should act, because they’re a man….

Finally, Sabrina (urban, high school) pointed out how the segregation of physical facilities in public schools reinforces gender socialization according to a binary system:

What I see getting reinforced here…. and the issues are really particular…. the bathroom. If you are transgender, which bathroom do you use? Worse: which locker room? And that comes up a lot. I have a girl who self-identifies in a masculine way…. she knows it makes kids uncomfortable …. girls….

uncomfortable for her to be in the locker room with them at the same time…. she looks like a boy…. but we don’t have a place for her to change, so what message are we giving to her? And I would say that the phys. ed. department is the most sensitive department here around these issues…. they get it…. and yet they could not bend outside of “Well, where would you like me to have her change?…. and I think we need to figure that out and be…. the way we have it set up is very 1950’s…. you know, the gyms are separated by gender, the locker rooms…. that’s a definite reinforcement …. 

Even though public schools do not typically seem to encourage discourse about gender issues, the social workers in this study, when questioned, seemed well aware of the forces of gender socialization operating in that environment. They also acknowledged the existence in schools of a gender binary with
stereotypical conceptualizations of “female” and “male” as polar opposites. What follows next is an examination of the social workers’ perceptions regarding the prerequisite factors that allow the emergence of gender variance in spite of those normative conditions.

**SUBTHEME: INCREASED OVERALL DIVERSITY AS PREREQUISITE FOR THE EMERGENCE OF GENDER VARIANCE**

In the interviews, the social workers were asked for a general description of their school’s orientation toward diversity, as a context for analyzing that community’s response to gender variance. In terms of diversity in the respective school buildings, almost all of the social workers made note of significant numbers of special education students. Diversity patterns along racial and ethnic lines, as well as in terms of socio-economic status, were predictable: The city schools were described as very diverse, the others as less so. Perceptions of the political climate in the school community and resulting attitudes toward “difference” varied. However, the urban schools were described as more accepting of differences, an observation that seems to have implications for the acceptance of gender variance, as was confirmed during more specific exploration of that topic. Susan (urban, middle school) described her school as open to diversity, particularly compared to her own public school experiences as a student:

I will give the kids credit… you know, where I grew up was a small, predominately white suburban area…. and in comparing the two, I think that our kids are incredibly accepting…. and I do very much so…. much more so than where I grew up, so I think that’s a big positive…. and I think that the staff here is
incredibly accepting of differences …. I don’t think you come to work here if you
don’t want to be around a diverse population…. that has to be something you are
okay with…. I guess with parents, I think the parents are pretty open…. I do
think…. I do wish sometimes we had a more diverse staff …. we have a
predominately white staff, and the student population is…. I don’t know the
numbers, but I would say roughly 75, maybe 70% African-American…. maybe
not that high, maybe a little lower …. and then the Latina/Latino population is
growing pretty rapidly …. so no, the staff really doesn’t represent the kids that we
teach and I do wish that it was more even, you know …. but I think in large part
we are an accepting school, an accepting community…. we are comfortable with
differences, whatever they may be…. 

Sabrina (urban, high school) also compared her school to one in the suburbs, attended by
her own children:

Well, it depends which group you’re with, right?…. and I think that as in all small
communities…. or large communities…. as I said, it [the school] is a small
city…. you can definitely find people who are small-minded and who tend to
isolate themselves within their own subgroup…. but I would say as a whole, this
is a more flexible community around understanding diversity issues, because the
children in it have been exposed to diversity issues throughout their
lives….…. however, it [bullying] does still happen….…. I hear a lot
around gender issues…. I don’t hear as much around ethnicity as I expected…. I
hear a lot about disability too…. 

Dawn (urban, elementary) made an interesting observation about acceptance to
differences in her school, relating it to her own privileged position as a white person from the suburbs:

I'm thinking of differences in a different way probably than a lot of people would, because we [the school community] are very different from a lot of the people in this area, from the people you might find in __________ [name of suburb]. But we are also very accepting of people that are from suburbia or who are more traditional .... me for example…. I'm kind of different here, you know, because I am a white woman with a lot of education and a lot of.... you know.... and I drive a nice car and so I'm the outsider here, really, but I feel very welcomed and accepted and needed.... and that works okay....

Cynthia (urban, elementary) talked about her school’s diversity in terms of family composition:

I think that the school community is pretty open to diversity… I feel like we always try and think out-of-the-box, if something comes up…. I think of family situations…. I’ve had conversations with a lot of kids whose families don’t fit into neat packages…. families come in all different sizes, especially here, I think…. the kids live with extended families, or mom’s boyfriend has kids, or grandparents …. so there is a wide network of family…. yes, maybe because it’s an urban setting, yes I think so…. I think some of the kids are more accepting of someone who’s different because everyone is a little bit different, whereas in a suburban district someone might stick out a little bit more.

Monica (urban, elementary)’s positive perception of her school community with respect to diversity was also related to its urban setting:
I feel…. I feel like we are a pretty open community for differences in general…. I feel like you have to be, to work in an urban school…. I feel like we are open in so many ways…. I wish our staff was more diverse…. like we have mostly female teachers…. we have like a handful of male teachers…. we have mostly Caucasian teachers…. we have very limited…. some of our paraprofessionals are people of color, but…. you know, I think we need more diversity on staff, because we have such a diverse student population…. I think it would help kids feel more connected, feel more tied in sometimes, you know….

Interviewer: What about the parents?

Monica: I think it’s hard to say…. I mean, I think…. again, you can’t live in this community and not be open in a lot of ways…. on the other hand, I do feel like there are a lot of prejudices, and a lot of people judging people…. maybe not based on necessarily color, but…. you know…. other outward appearances they might give….

Stacy (rural-suburban, elementary) noted that her school is more homogeneous in terms of race, but is diverse with respect to socio-economic status. She also mentioned distinct programming aimed at teaching the students about differences:

To my experience, I think it’s a very inclusive community…. (…) …. we do a lot of character education, and we bring in programs to educate on diversity, to support diversity…. yeah…. we do a great deal for that.

Courtney (suburban, middle school) was somewhat less positive about progress toward diversity in her school:

I would say…. I think we still have a ways to go…. I think we can really teach
tolerance, and teach that there must be respect for people’s differences…. but I think a lot of kids are living in homes where the families are either being disrespectful to minorities, or joking about, maybe about homosexuals…. joking about that and…. they are uncomfortable…. and so the kids are learning that message at home and they bring it to school, and that’s what they repeat…..

Later in the interview, Courtney twice more expressed her views regarding the sometimes negative influence of parental attitudes, like in this statement:

I think so…. I still…. I hear comments being made about students being gay…. I hear comments about…. I still, even though we have the [new state] legislation in place and kids have had a lot of talks on bullying and trainings on bullying and assemblies on bullying…. they have done reading about bullying…. we still hear comments, disparaging comments made about students that have disabilities, students that have issues with their weight or race, their ethnicity…. still hear it…. it’s not completely gone…. and I think some of it is coming from at home…. the parents are talking about it at home and the students are hearing about it, and they are just incorporating their parents’ values into the way they behave….

On the other hand, Tara (suburban, elementary) gave an unsolicited example of how even the suburbs are becoming more diverse, when she described a Banana Splits group, a staple of school social work activity:

….. and I have expanded the Banana Splits group for our population in that it’s more of a changing family…. so it’s not necessarily that the parents are divorced, it could be that a parent is in jail, so…. or you’re living with a grandparent and not having your biological parents involved on a daily basis…. so my definition
has changed…. so it’s really…. I just tell the kids if for any reason you don’t live with both your mother and your father, come on over…. so sometimes we have kids who are from a family that…. a parent has passed away, or they’re adopted, or…. so it just opened the door more…. 

Later in the interview, Tara talked specifically about the issue of same-sex relationships in response to a question of how open the school community is toward diversity:

…. we have a few families that have like same-sex parents…. and I can say that there are some people where that's a non-issue, whereas others I definitely could see a reaction to that….both in parents and staff…. I would say overall open, but I think that there are times when they are faced with an unexpected difference that they are taken aback…. but I haven’t ever seen any behaviors that I would…. from the adults…. I haven’t seen behaviors that I would describe as discriminatory…. or actually causing a change in their behavior towards them.

Sabrina (urban, high school) also talked about views on gender and gender differences, particularly with respect to school staff:

There are a few staff members who just struggle with their own internalized fears, you know…. and it’s easy to remember just the one or two people that are negative, instead of remembering all the love that goes on here every day…. and that’s why I was “I think we’re emerging”…. you know, we have a fairly young staff and that helps us, because what I’ve found is the new teachers, the young teachers, this is no big deal…. this has been the conversation since they were in high school…. versus people perhaps in my age group, which is in the forties…. and it is kind of a big deal if it’s a new way of thinking about the world…. I had
an older, male teacher say something to me about “all the porn going on in the hallway”…. and I’m like “What are you talking about?”…. and he says “all the girl action”…. and I’m like, “That’s not porn….those are relationships…. and why is that more offensive to you than a girl and a boy kissing each other in the hallway?”…. and he responded very favorably to the conversation, but those are conversations that are definitely emerging…. and I’m glad people are comfortable talking to me about it…. and knowing that I’m a safe person to process it with…. I think it’s hard for some of the older staff.

While there is some variability within settings (as in the example above), it seems that the urban schools have an edge in terms of openness to diversity because of the existing racial, cultural, and socio-economic diversity among the student population and in the surrounding community. However, the responses from the social workers also indicate that demographic changes may lead to greater acceptance of diversity in some other settings. The extent to which this acceptance of differences generally is related to the manifestation of gender variance specifically will be analyzed next.

**SUBTHEME: MANIFESTATIONS OF GENDER VARIANCE IN A BINARY CONTEXT**

Acknowledgement of gender variance assumes the acknowledgement of gender identity as a worthwhile and interesting topic of discussion. However, discourse about gender identity seemed quite limited in the schools where the participants in this study work. Even when specifically prompted, gender issues per se did not seem to rank high in descriptions of a typical work day in the lives of this study’s participants, except if they
occurred in the context of bullying (and then only at the secondary level). Tracy (urban, middle school) described it this way:

It depends on the bullying…. it depends on what they're being bullied for .... can I say a word that's not very nice?.... like if I have boy coming in who is being told that he's a faggot, or a queer, or a pussy, then I have to deal with those issues, because I have another boy or girl who's being derogatory to that boy. Or I have a woman coming in here …. and she portrays herself as a male and she's getting called “dyke”.... those are the issues I'm definitely going to talk about with them and address with them …. and they do occur.... not frequently, but they do occur.

Much like with issues of sexual identity, “gender-positive” discussions seem to be relatively rare (“gender-positive” meaning “valuing gender as a positive characteristic and as a concept worthy of intellectual curiosity; the relationship with sexuality is explored later in this chapter). Nevertheless, such discussions do occur, as noted in this passionate statement by Susan (urban, middle school):

…. and I feel like, with my girls individually and in groups, I really try to focus on how important it is to stick together as women, and what it means to be a woman and what it doesn’t mean to be a woman.

Isolated places within the school environment may also support more expansive discourse. Sabrina (urban, high school) gave these examples:

A place where I think we’re teaching more diversity of thought is the fine arts department…. much more flexible…. also the [honors] program here…. they’re teaching, they did a big unit on “Otherness”…. and kids were talking about gender as an identity…. when I was in high school, kids didn’t have that
language…. you know, gender…. what’s the difference between gender and sex?…. and kids were coming in and talking about it, and showing me their projects, and doing video presentations and website presentations….

In general however, gender identity seems to be largely assumed, rather than explored in public school settings. If so, is this picture beginning to change as the result of students who are coming out as transgender or gender-variant? To learn more about this, a number of interview questions asked the social workers about their experiences, or lack thereof, with students presenting as gender-variant. Their responses confirmed anecdotal reports and tentative research findings elsewhere: In spite of the intense socializing forces that shape stereotypical gender identities, gender-variant kids are becoming more visible. Without exception, all fourteen school social workers in this study at least knew of at least one gender-variant student in their district; a majority knew of several such students and had had actual interactions with them. Brenda (urban, elementary) commented on the need for social workers to be aware of early manifestations of gender dysphoria and of the developmental process that some youth may go through with respect to a gender transition:

…. you’ll get a lot of people in the elementary saying “We'll never have to deal with that….”, but certainly, that’s not necessarily the case…. but also at the middle school and the high school, because I have the feeling that that’s a real issue for them, in terms of kids taking on complete gender reversals or changes, and they are dealing with that…. so they really have day-to-day knowledge, in terms of kids who are in the middle of that…. well, it’s funny…..I had a little girl who I worked with years ago, who was very tomboyish…. and I saw her like at
[name of supermarket], working…. and she completely looks like a boy…. like I don’t really know……I was just like “How are you?” ….and she said “Good…. how are you?”…. but I really don’t have a sense at all where she is in that process, because I haven’t talked to her since fourth grade…. she’s probably 21…. As somewhat of a trend, it could be said that, with regard to this particular sample, the experience with gender variance increased according to grade level, while it also was reported as more common in the urban schools, as in this statement by Sabrina (urban, high school):

…. I think we have more students than the suburbs do, experimenting with this…. experimenting in a way too that makes adults really uncomfortable…. three years ago, four years ago, there was a boy here who was a gorgeous girl…. and he came in dressed every day, full drag….beautiful, beautiful girl…..and people didn’t know what to do, they just didn’t address it…. adults, yeah…. and the kids kind of….what’s interesting to me….it was when I had first come up here, I remembering seeing him……I’m like ”Wow, he’s just gorgeous, spectacular”…..and one kid watched me one time, looking…. and he’s like “What are you looking at?”…. and I’m like “What shoes!.....fantastic!”…. and I think the kids are quicker to adapt to it than we are, as adults……

Interviewer: In terms of numbers, who many transgender or gender-questioning kids are in this school?

Sabrina: That I know personally….? Ten….? So probably more, right? If they have identified ten to me, there’s probably thirty…. those are kids that self-identified….
Interviewer: And when you say ten, is that ten at this moment, or….

Sabrina: At this moment….ten right now, that I’m working with on a regular basis. I think this is more of an issue than people realize.

Another question about gender variance that I posed to the social workers concerned their perception of what the school experience is or would be like for a student who does not adhere to stereotypical norms of gender expression. While the comments were quite varied, several of the interviewees commented that gender-variant students are likely to become the victims of bullying. For example, April (urban, pre-k through 8) described a student who appears to be bullied and isolated because of her gender expression:

…. there is a girl that has really short hair…. she used to have long hair and I guess she wanted to have it cut off…. either a 7th or 8th grader…. and they are constantly calling her a boy…. and to be honest with you, before I knew her, I thought she was a boy…. because I didn’t know a lot of the kids at the beginning of the year…. the seventh and eighth graders, being new…. and I was really relieved when I found out the truth before I made any kind of error …. and I know this is something that she struggles with…. and other teachers have brought it to my attention that other kids are saying that to her…. and she is really depressed, it's causing her to be really depressed, you know.

April expressed concern about the vulnerability of students like her:

I guess …. I don’t know if it’s my personal theory or my professional theory…. I guess they all merge together…. is that people get very uncomfortable with those
kinds of things, with any differences about somebody…. and it gives you…. it’s that simple idea of putting somebody else down makes you look better…. I see some very simple stuff …. you kind of become an easy target, you’re kind of handing somebody something …. and everybody’s looking for a laugh, everybody’s looking for being kind of the top dog…. and those kinds of kids…. it’s either visually…. you can see it, or the feminine mannerisms for boys…. and things like that…. I just think that…..it’s on a platter for the kids that want to be king of the castle…. and it’s quite a few kids that we see, leaders, who want to be king of the of the castle …. and they do it by targeting those kinds of kids.

Later in the interview, April added:

…. and I think a lot of times you’ll get talking to that kid about one issue and you find out…. ”Oh yeah, they called me gay the whole way to school”…. “They grabbed me, and do all this stuff”…. you end up finding out more and more and more…. and they’re just so darn used to it, that they don’t even say anything…. and you go “What? What’s going on on the bus?”…. and it has just become kind of commonplace for them….it’s really…. it’s very sad, very sad.

Tracy (urban, middle school) also pointed out the risk of being bullied, in spite of the assertion by several of the social workers in urban settings that their schools are relatively diverse:

They are bullied, boys especially …. (pause).…. I have a student now that's wearing a bra, stuffing a bra, wearing shirts off the side …. and when you look at him on paper he identifies as a male, or his parents identify him as male …. but he wants to be considered a woman…. he's just showing it in his dress right now,
but it's a concern for teachers …. like, “I saw him wearing a bra”.... okay, well, I personally don't feel I need to address it.... it's him expressing himself, so let him express himself.... I think it's just people feeling uncomfortable…. Other social workers described how some students try to hide their gender-variant behavior. Cynthia (urban, elementary) recounted the experiences of two gender-variant boys she worked with:

You know, I had it more at the middle school…. I had two very feminine boys that I worked with…. they were still younger kids …. and for both of them…. one talked about being made fun of a lot…. the other one was almost secretly doing the girl things…. I remember him telling me that it was more his brother making fun of him…. he loved stickers, he loved…. I mean he was a girly girl…. he loved the sparkles…. everything you could think of when you think of a girl…. he would kind of hide it as best as he could from other people, because his brother at home ridiculed him so much …. so he really was kind of withdrawn and would like to read…. but he liked to read the fairy books and he would sometimes kind of cover things up, because he didn’t want people to make fun of him …. but when you could get him alone and he was able to show you what he really liked, he would light up and it was so nice to see him be able to talk about what he truly liked …. but in a group setting he couldn’t do that …. and so I worked with him …. as he got older, it was nice…. he decided he really did want to work one-on-one, because he felt he could never do these things in front of other boys .... I don’t know whether he would have felt more comfortable if he could do it in front of girls or not…. I don’t know…. but the other boy definitely talked about getting
made fun of, that people were very harsh to him….

Recalling the experiences of a “feminine” (gay) boy that she worked with, April (urban, pre-K through 8) spoke of the effects of parental non-acceptance on students’ behavior in the school setting:

…. I have seen a lot of that…. I have seen a lot of the kids turn inward, kind of that self-hatred…. and just sort of leading a secret life and just kind of dealing with the bullying, kind of accepting it…. I remember he was telling me about the bus ride…. bus rides are really tough for feminine boys, because they just can’t hide it…. they can’t hide who they are…. they try…. but you can’t hide mannerisms…. and if that’s associated with how they are feeling…. (hesitates)…. I don’t know if that makes any sense, but…. Other social workers commented that school life is generally easier for masculine girls than feminine boys, since girls appear to have more leeway in terms of gender roles and gender expression. For example, Brenda (urban, elementary) stated:

I think boys have it much more difficult…. and again, when they’re little, it’s not as pronounced…. but it gets more difficult for them, probably from about third grade on…. I think that the K, 1, 2 is still…. that you’re just a baby…. you’re a little boy…. and I think by third grade you’re supposed to be a boy…. that’s kind of what I’ve seen…. Cynthia (urban, elementary), when asked how more masculine girls are received in her school, responded:

You know, as I said, the one I’m thinking of here, who is such an outstanding football player, I think she’s just so well respected…. I think…. girls who are
good in sports are very well-respected …. I’m trying to think of a student …. I think it’s hard on the kids…. I think they have a hard time fitting in, or being able to talk to someone about …. the boys more so than the girls, because I think the girls do get elevated for being a tomboy [when it comes to sports].

Dawn (urban, elementary) expressed the view that toughness is valued in the urban environment, leading to a differential response to gender-variant boys versus gender-variant girls:

I think that toughness here, physical toughness, is something that is admired by the kids…. not by the staff, but I think that that is part of the culture that we live in here…. being physically and verbally aggressive is almost like a survival tactic…. and I think that, especially for boys, to be not quite so tough .... and I do know a couple of boys who are more soft-spoken and not as quick to anger, not as quick to respond physically.... and I imagine.... I don't have any kids on my caseload right now that are suffering from being tormented about that or even teased, but I would imagine that that does happen…. I do know a couple of the girls here that come to mind that are very, you know, rough around the edges…. and proud about that, and ready to go at any time whenever someone looks at them the wrong way .... they can quickly take somebody right down…. but that's almost a status thing here .... and I think it's not something that other girls look down upon…. I think other girls might be a little bit intrigued by that, by the aggressive female …. here it's a little different than you might find in a suburban school.... I think it's something that they do see in their families or communities, that they bring with them too.... I know a lot of parents that will say to their kids
“If anyone bothers you, you bother them right back .... if anybody hits, you hit them right back” .... that's kind of how they are raised .... it's everything we try to avoid, but....

While some of the interviewees reported negative reactions to gender-variant behavior, others noted acceptance on the part of peers. Stacy (rural-suburban, elementary), in discussing the acceptance of a third-grade girl with “masculine tendencies” by her peers, commented on the particular character of each cohort of students as a factor:

.... it’s also… you know, every year takes on its own flavor.... so the incoming kindergarteners, until they are fifth graders, kind have a personality onto themselves.... so every grade level has their own.... so it’s somewhat dependent on that as well, I find.... she might have been in a grade.... where that grade were just very caring, empathic, sensitive students, you know.... where had she joined us a year earlier or later, perhaps her reception would have been different.... hard to say....

Susan (urban, middle school) expressed pride in the acceptance of diversity, including gender diversity, in her school:

So I mean, yes, now that I’m processing all of this.... like I’m saying earlier how kids in this setting are much more accepting than I can remember when I was their age.... and we have a lot of kids that are very out.... whether they are gay or bisexual or just figuring it out.... and just in the way that they dress or present themselves.... we have a young man, for instance.... he wears pink leggings almost every day, and a pink sweatshirt and, you know, things that you think a young lady would wear.... and he’s very comfortable with that.... and the kids
don’t give them a hard time, which I guess, you know, is shocking in a way…. but
the kids really are pretty accepting…. I think they’re just so used to so many
different ways of life, that things don’t face them as much…. which is a great
quality, which is something that we should all absorb a little bit …. Do I think it’s
a sign of the times? No …. well, it could be a little bit a sign of the times, there is
no way to count that out…. but I think it is the community…. I still live in the
community where I grew up and that would never be okay, that would never be
accepted, that kid would be terrorized …. that certainly doesn’t make it okay…. the
fact that that would happen is terrible…. but I think that this community is
pretty open to people’s differences and I think that allows kids to feel like they
can be who they are a little bit more freely…. I think that’s a real strong suit of
this area…. I don’t know if it’s the urban culture or what it is, but I
definitely find here that kids are just relatively able to, you know, express
themselves in ways that I don’t remember being able to do …. so I think that’s a
good thing.

Interviewer: What about the more “tomboyish” girls?
Susan: Well…. I’m speaking broadly…. I do feel similarly about them…. you
know, we have a good amount of tomboyish type girls here, very openly gay,
masculine dressing females …. and they always have a large group of friends with
them …. they don’t seem to be ostracized, they don’t seem to be isolated, they
seem to be going about their day the same way that everybody else is here, you
know…. with that said, I’m not with them all the time…. I’m sure that bullying
occurs, I’m sure that those things do happen…. but it’s certainly not any more
evident than any of the other bullying that’s going on here…. so I think it is a pretty comfortable space for them, which I think is a good thing…. which I’m proud to say.

Several of the social workers reported experiences of acting-out behavior on the part of students that they related to issues of gender or sexuality, either as a manifestation of some psychological conflict or as a reaction to social non-acceptance. Monica (urban, elementary) stated that the school experiences of a child who does not adhere to established gender norms is “terrible”. She told the story of one particular student who seemed to be dealing with a number of issues:

I have…. I had a sixth grader…. and I think about her all the time…. so she was here in sixth grade…. she was very masculine, just in everything that she did…. in her appearance, in the way that she presented herself…. and she was very…. it just seemed like she was uncomfortable in her skin…. but she overcompensated for it, so she was like…. she was loud, and she was boisterous, and she was…. she had some other secondary things going on, like ADHD that was finally diagnosed, and things like that…. but she…. so she really struggled to fit in…. anywhere….

Connie (urban, k-8) wondered out loud if gender or sexuality issues may underlie the acting-out behavior of some of the boys she works with:

I mean schools right now are so much about test scores and, you know, keeping kids behavior in check…. I don't even think they think about things like that, that kids are struggling with this I mean…. I could just think of one in particular who
just for no reason would just flip, you know…. he has a together family…. no real reasons…. and really he would go off …. and one time I said to him, when he was being held down by people, “You can tell us whatever it is…. if you hear the devil talk to you or if you see people here or if you're in love with a boy or if someone touched you…. if you think you are girl, anything…. I mean, because with this kid I just had a feeling it was something just so deep for him…. because there were just no other things going on…. so I wonder sometimes with some of these kids whose behavior is just so outrageous for no apparent reason, if it's …. boys again especially…. I often wonder with a lot of the boys that they might think they are gay…. I've never, I rarely think about transgender, honestly…. but I often wonder if they think they are gay, or might like their friend more than they think they should, and it is just coming out in this rage…. Sonya (urban, k-8) also made a hypothetical link between behavioral problems and underlying issues of gender and sexual identity:

Yeah more subtly …. there's been some more …. like I said, I do have a couple of kids who, you know, kind of struggle with these types of things…. and I feel like they, you know, those I see all the time …. so I don't know…. one student is constantly arguing with his peers…. well, is it the surface issues or is it more that he is struggling with his gender?…. and to even approach the subject with him…. no…. I mean…. and I always tell them you can tell me whatever you want…. nothing is going to surprise me, nothing is going to shock me…. and I kind of leave the door open, because he doesn't like it when you bring it up…. but, you know, I do have specific cases …. I would say probably about three that, you know,
kind of question their gender ....three out of seventy that I work with consistently, who I would say are questioning their gender or sexuality.

In contrast to the view that behavioral problems can be associated with gender variance were the descriptions of well-adjusted students. Tara’s (suburban, elementary) account of a middle school student she worked with previously, was one of several such stories told during this study:

It [gender variance] hasn’t happened in the elementary level…. it did happen in the middle school level when I was there…. and I think the struggle that I had at that time was that the parents saw it as a mental health issue…. and yet, despite the fact that when I would talk to the parent and insure that this is the most well-adjusted child I have ever spoken to…. and she was, she was…. she didn’t care…..and she was very confident, and she knew what she wanted, who she was…. and she was comfortable in her own being and knew that the reason she was meeting with me was because mom was making her….(...) … I think that people could relate to how it was a struggle for the parents…. it was interesting the things that would come up as the issues…. so, for instance, if you’re in orchestra, girls wear black skirt, white top…. she says: “I don’t wear skirts…. I’m not going to wear a skirt…. I will wear a pair of black pants, which is neutral…. but you’re not getting me in a dress”……and like why that has to be a fight….(...)…. it came up (laughs)….and they said “Oh, okay”…. but I don’t know why it even had to be an issue…. so it’s silly rules like that….(...) … at that time she wasn’t so much saying “I want to make permanent changes”…. she was saying “This is who I am….I am comfortable this way…. I am not
comfortable doing girly things…. this is who I am”…. and it wasn’t …. it wasn’t more than that, at that time….

Connie (urban, k-8), emphasized the role of temperament and self-confidence, while making a distinction between her perception of gender-variant boys versus girls:

I had a first grade boy who loved to play with dolls and told me he wanted to be a girl…. and he would say it in the group in front of other children and he didn't care…. it almost seems like the kids who have a good sense of themselves don't mind putting themselves out there…. I don't think the girls mind at all…. whatever age, the girls seem much more confident to be whoever they are than the boys do…. then once they get to middle school it seems like almost cool to be different.

Another interesting comment made by a couple of the social workers in discussing their experiences with gender variance, concerns the mention of “odd” (or “on the spectrum”) with reference to certain more “feminine” boys. This perception seems to reflect research observations with respect to a hypothetical link between gender dysphoria and autism spectrum disorder (including the old diagnosis of Asperger’s syndrome), discussed in the literature review. Connie (urban, k-8) brought up the perceived connection with Asperger’s disorder in this excerpt:

…. and somewhere this has to come in…. because I think Asperger's has to be addressed…. because I think the kids with Asperger’s, I'm just wondering…. all these boys who may be going to be gay one day when they grow up, being diagnosed with Asperger's now…. because so many of these Asperger's boys seem
very effeminate to me, very emotive and very sensitive…. they seem much softer, more feminine than other boys…. I don’t get any rough-and-tumble and aggressive boys, masculine boys, with an Asperger’s diagnosis …. so that’s a study I’m waiting to see…. (after I ask Connie whether these boys might develop as be gender-variant instead of gay, she continues….)…. they have many stereotypical behaviors of gay men…. the way they walk, the way they talk, the way they dress …. and maybe they are just going to be softer men, softer heterosexual men…. 

Monica (urban, elementary) used the word “odd” several times in her description of some of the “feminine boys” she has encountered:

Yes…. yes…. but I feel like…. see, it’s hard…. at this age, at some of these ages that I’m thinking of…. like the fifth grade boys, a sixth grade boy…. the boys that I’m thinking of, that are more feminine…. and I don’t know if it’s feminine, but they are just odd…. they seem different than their male counterparts…. so I think that they are targets in some ways…. and I don’t know if it’s because of appearing feminine, or just because they are different…. like they are not as athletic, they’re quieter…. they are odd, in that they……socially they are a little, not as successful as some of the other boys who are more masculine…. so I think sometimes…. I don’t know if that goes hand in hand…. or what comes first…. or if it’s my perception that because you’re quieter…. or you’re a little, you are not as comfortable being outgoing like your male counterparts…. that somehow that makes you feminine, which it doesn’t (emphatically), but you know what I mean?…. the ones that I’m thinking of that fit that profile a little bit more, are the
kids that are like “Oh my gosh…. I know that kid….. that kid is so odd…”…. no one will say “He’s so feminine…. but “He is so odd….like I never know what’s coming out of his mouth next”…..

As was suggested in the literature review, the link between gender variance and autism spectrum disorders is merely speculative at the moment and may well turn out to be spurious, since it seems likely that a combination of gender dysphoria and lack of acceptance may in and of itself create “odd” behavior. Also, it may well be that children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder are just more resistant to socialization into any kind of stereotypical role.

Finally, an interesting observation applying to both the social workers’ perception of the reaction by other students and staff, as well as their own interpretation of gender variance, concerns the inclination to label gender-variant behavior as “gay”. In terms of the social workers themselves, some excerpts illustrate this point. For example, Susan (urban, middle school) appears to make the jump from gender to sexuality in the following response:

Yeah…. a few kids are definitely coming to mind…. and you know, it’s interesting, because the kids that are coming to mind, both feminine boys and masculine girls, are very open about their sexuality, more so that I can ever remember kids being at their age in middle school…. but I think that regardless of how open they are and how comfortable they seem on the outside, it must be very difficult for them.

Similarly, Brenda (urban, elementary), when asked how more pronounced gender
variance -- “a tomboyish girl, a feminine boy” – would play out with peers, replied with reference to sexual (as opposed to gender) identity:

…. I have one boy right now, that I think is having the hardest time, because he’s in a Muslim home…. and he, we….you know, we’re skirting a lot, because I don’t think he really, has completely…. I don’t think he understands completely…..he is an eighth grade boy, and he is a very beautiful boy, and the girls love him…. and so he has this persona of being very sensitive…. the girls really like that…. he talks to them like he’s their friend…..he is their friend, but it’s …. so for these girls, they don’t really, they don’t see him as anything more…. I don’t believe…..than their friend who is just great….and that’s what he is…. but he is really struggling, because he doesn’t really like any of these girls, and that’s fine…. I think it’s a lot of sexuality stuff and he doesn’t really know where he fits into all this yet….

Courtney (suburban, middle school), referring to a common tendency to label all gender-variant behavior as being part of a student’s sexual orientation, seemed to be accepting of that explanation:

Well, I think that they are…. there can be groups of kids that will kind of label that student…. like, say “he must be gay” or “she must be gay”…. ”because she likes to wear her hair short”…. or “He likes to wear purple, or ….you know, he wears earrings, and he grows his hair long…. and he speaks gently and seems kind of girlish”….so, you know, they say things like that…. I think there can be some confusion at this age as to their sexual preference…..I think both boys and girls sometimes can feel attracted to both sexes…. and they are confused…. and
they just don’t know what they really like…. and then there are some that truly believe that they are gay…. and that can be hard for them too…..

The automatic link between gender and sexuality, shown in the statements quoted above, is understandable, as there appears to be a degree of overlap between gender expression and sexual orientation. On the other hand, it is also clear that there exists, among this particular sample of social workers, some conceptual confounding of the notions of gender identity and sexual identity. Consequently, it can be assumed that the observations with respect to gender variance that have been cited here include both straight and gay students (and that some in the latter group may not consider themselves to be gender-variant). The finding that gender variant behavior can be misinterpreted as a manifestation of sexual orientation is an important one, especially in the context of public schooling and school social work practice. This particular context will be examined next, after which the implications for practice with gender-variant students will be discussed further.

**THEME #2 – THE SILENCING OF DIFFERENCES**

Can issues of gender variance be discussed in public schools, in social work groups and in the classroom, in a counseling context or as part of an educational approach? Or does a perceived connection with (homo)sexuality make it a toxic topic? A related issue: Are there resources with regard to gender variance or sexual diversity available in the school library or media center, and are social workers aware of these resources? To elucidate these issues, the social workers in this study were asked specific questions about the discussion of gender, sexuality, and homosexuality (same-sex parents
in particular), and about the availability of resources in these areas. Overall, their responses to these questions indicate the limited discourse concerning gender and sexual diversity.

**SUBTHEME: TALKING ABOUT GENDER IS LIKE TALKING ABOUT SEX**

First of all, with respect to same-sex parenting, the social workers, especially those in urban settings, reported that it is becoming more common (or visible) in their schools and does not seem to be a big deal, especially as far as the children is concerned. The social workers stated that kids talk about it casually in social work groups and that their school communities at large seem pretty accepting, especially if the gay or lesbian parents are seen as involved in their child’s education. Tracy (urban, middle school), who started her school social work career in a rural district several years ago, made the following observation:

I think it [same-sex relationships] would come up as a conversation, definitely. I think these would be more of the conversations you would have in this [urban] district…. just because…. I think like, for example, when I used to work in this one district that was really rural and …. I had some teachers that were definitely really stuck in their ways…. their perception was everybody has a mom and a dad …. and every parent is involved …. and it's a great community and everything is so hunky-dory…. and we don't have any issues here …. so when you talk to a kid about “I'm going to call your parents”, and then the kid is like “I don't have any parents”, or “I live with my grandma”, or “my mom and dad died”, or …. you know for them it's like …. (sucks in air) “Oh my goodness”, you know…. because
they have this perception.... I think here we have a perception of “whoever is taking care of you”.... it's like, okay, grandma is there, or you've got two moms, or you've got two dads.... thank God you have somebody.

And Sonya (urban, k-8) recalled this incident:

..... We had this form and we were so embarrassed.... not to sidetrack.... but it was our social history form and one of the other social workers sent it home, and it was a same-sex couple and it said “mothers information”, “father's information”…… and she was mortified when it came back…. she was like “Oh my goodness, I didn't even think”…. so just our forms…. just, you know, little things like that come up…. nobody is overtly being discriminatory, but there are tons of little things that come up….

With respect to same-sex relationships, Sabrina (urban, high school) mentioned a teacher colleague who is “out” to his students about being in a gay marriage. By contrast, one of the social workers in this study’s sample self-identified as lesbian and as being in a same-sex relationship, but added that she is not out to students or parents. In her words:

I never come out to kids and I rarely bring up homosexuality with kids as an issue.... and I feel bad…. I feel bad about that….

Only a few of the social workers were aware of any literature or educational materials regarding diverse sexual or gender identities in their school library or media center. The social worker in the urban high school seemed certain that these resources were indeed available, while a social worker in one of the urban elementary schools had seen a book about same-sex parents, but was not sure if students would feel comfortable
taking it out. Connie (urban, k-8) mentioned a section of materials on “sensitive subjects” that was been available for 6th graders in the k-6 school where she worked previously:

…..and they weren't even all that sensitive.... you know public schools are just very nervous .... and this is a major city.... I can't imagine in the suburbs....

If resources on gender and sexual identity were present in the other schools, their availability did not seem widely publicized.

To a greater or lesser extent, all of the social workers in this study stated that discussions of gender and sexuality could only be conducted within certain parameters. Thus, such discussions seemed typically allowed if they took place during counseling sessions or social work groups, and if there was an appropriate context for them (such as questions from students). By contrast, more educational presentations in classrooms were only suggested as feasible if approved by administrators and if parents were informed ahead of time. Such a cautious approach did not seem to apply only to discussions of sexual or gender variance, but to anything sexual at all. Thus, several of the interviewees remarked that sex education, such as it is, appears to be limited to the biological and health aspects of sexuality. Clearly, such a restrictive approach to sex education effectively excludes gender-variant and transgender students. The following quotes illustrate the tentativeness toward discussions of gender and sexuality in schools. For example, Connie (urban, k-8) said this about the possibility of discussing gender variance in the classroom:

…. there would have to be a specific letter telling parents exactly what we’re going to talk about, and the parent would have to sign it before the kid could
participate…. We don't even talk about homosexuality…. we don't talk about sex. I mean now, really…. I mean …. yeah, for many reasons, you know…. there's no time…. and people, teachers , get all nervous, you know…. and everybody has different beliefs, and that's what the parents should teach them…. and parents think that's not the school’s business…. 

Stacy (rural-suburban, elementary), while clearly willing to support a gender-variant student individually, suggested that a cautious approach would be needed in her school with respect to the education of peers:

I think I could talk about it in general with them…. and approach it from how “everybody is different”…. and embracing differences…. I don’t know that I would be able to do that more specific with them…. just…. schools are…. I have to be very conscious of the families and how they might feel about what they want their kids to know, or not know…. so I think it would be a very sensitive topic, that I would really have to take a very broad look at before I addressed it…. especially in a classroom setting…. yeah, I could see…. boy, you know, there are so many different aspects to consider…. but for the student specific to the issue, I certainly would…. if there was a need that arose…. I would absolutely talk to that student…. and if there were incidents that arose that required intervention on my part, with the student and other students involved…. I would absolutely do that…. but I could see addressing it more from a behavioral and socialization aspect, rather than perhaps an educational…. 

Tammy (urban, elementary) responded as follows to the question as to whether or not talking about gender variance is made harder because people associate it with sexuality:
Yes, right…. absolutely…. yes. I think there is an invisible link…. that when you
talk about one, people are assuming you’re talking about both…. but there are
times when both are brought up at the same time…. so I certainly, I would be
even more leery about going there, especially at this age…. because kids are, first
of all, pretty immature…. I don’t think that there are that many of them that have
the higher level thinking and the intellectual skills to really understand what
information is being given…. like they’ll laugh if you say the word, oh ‘penis’ or
something like that…. that’s a big joke…. it lasts all day, you know…. that’s
really funny …. like ‘fart’ is really funny for like five days….. so that’s kind of
where these kids are…. so I don’t think that would be a good idea.

Susan (urban, middle school) agreed that people tend to link gender and sexuality:

Well, yeah…. I think that, you know, a lot of times we kind of group the two
[gender and sexuality] in our minds …. like we see a boy walking around in hot
pink tights and a pink sweatshirt …. we associate that with being gay or
bisexual…. I think they are definitely linked, I don’t think there’s any question in
my mind about that…. I guess that gives it an interesting component, you
know …. people sometimes teeter on whether or not, you know, they feel
comfortable talking about it …. I think the other issue is not so much that it’s not
allowed to be talked about…. I’ve never gotten that message, that something is
not allowed to be talked about …. no one has ever told me that…. maybe in some
districts that may be more of a firm rule …. but I think that the other piece is the
staff’s comfort in talking about it …. it’s not something that everybody is
comfortable talking about in general…. just sexuality on the whole is something
that people sometimes don’t feel comfortable talking about…. so when you bring in the gender variance piece, the homosexuality, being transgender, you know, it becomes a whole different level of the issue, and I think that people may feel uncomfortable talking about it…. some people may feel uncomfortable talking about it, but I don’t think it’s something that we are not allowed to talk about …. maybe if my principal were sitting here he would say different…. but I don’t know…. 

While Susan said she is comfortable talking about either issue in the setting where she works, she acknowledged that teachers are in a different position and may feel the need for some degree of self-censorship:

.... I’m trying to put myself in the teachers’ shoes, because I think I have a lot of freedom in here. There are things that I’m used to talking about that are considered more appropriate in this kind of counseling setting, rather than the classroom…. I don’t teach in a classroom, so maybe I’m incorrect in saying that teachers could talk about it in the classroom, have a classroom discussion…. because the more that I think about it…. I could see maybe some parents …. if the kid comes home and says we were talking about homosexuality or about boys who think they are girls …. coming home and saying things like that…. some parents may call …. this is all assumption, what I think might happen …. so I don’t know…. I mean, I would hope that we are allowed to kind of talk about this stuff and expose the kids to it and, you know, be honest and open with them…. that’s always the hope…. but there may be a level of censorship, because teachers are afraid of where the conversation might go or how parents might react or how
some kids might react.

Sonya (urban, k-8) stated that gender and sexuality, in general, are not easily talked about in the school setting, but expressed being comfortable herself discussing issues as they come up:

I think our curriculums don't do a very good job .... we are not as modern or as liberal as I think we should be .... text books, in all the examples they give it's always heterosexual.... I think we could do more, but I think school districts are.... and not just my school district, most school districts feel like they can't be too progressive…. sometimes they don’t want to upset parents, they don't want to upset taxpayers, so I feel like we have a long way to go…. (....).... but I think if I'm doing my job and giving accurate information …. I feel like this with anything sex-related at school, especially with kids …. they have so many questions and they don't get any answers, and I feel that as long as I'm acting from a place that's good and wanting to give kids the right information, then they can go ahead and fire me…. because if I can’t do my job the right way, then I don't want to do it.... that's kind of how I feel....(....).... I think I'm always comfortable.... and if parents really have an issue with it, then I can have a conversation with them about it, why I think it's important that I'm discussing this with their child.... you know, kids want information, they do .... and I think when you have discussions with them, like “You really shouldn't call this kid gay”, and you have an intellectual conversation with them about why they shouldn't and what it means to that other child, they really listen, they really do .... I think sometimes there is some group-think with kids and peer pressure and all that, but I have really good
discussions with kids…. and I haven’t had anyone too upset with me yet, so that’s good…. 

Sabrina (urban, high school), discussing the perceived link between gender identity and sexual identity, made a more general statement about her impression of the schools’ narrow focus on subject matter :

You know, I think my colleagues want to believe that their job is to teach biology, teach English…. so they don’t think of the children the way we’re talking about them…. more holistically, with sexual issues or identity issues…. and I don’t think they want to know…. I’m really honest here…. sometimes I have colleagues say “I didn’t need to know that”, when I share with them “Well, I think what’s going on with him is…."

You’re asking me “Do staff understand the difference between identity of gender and orientation?”…. I think it’s mixed…. I think it’s really mixed….I think in general, teaching professionals do not want to touch either issue…. they want to touch teaching…. and they don’t understand how identity and sexual orientation in your relationships with peers impact what they’re doing with them…. they want to see it as clean-cut issues…. I can see that in the elementary building especially…. ”Well, we like them no matter what, we are not going to judge them…. we just don’t want to know”…. and that makes me sad for the little kids, and that makes me sad for the big kids, ‘cause they’re all kids.

As previously described in the chapter on this study’s theoretical framework, heteronormativity includes overt and covert heterosexism and homophobia, as well as an underlying process of stereotypical gender socialization. The silencing of any discourse
about sexuality (and, by extension, about sexual and gender identity) maintains the heteronormative status quo and the traditional gender binary. Even the increasingly visible phenomenon of same-sex parenting seems to be reacted to at best, more frequently ignored as an avenue to teach about sexual and gender diversity.

**SUBTHEME: THE MINIMAL RESPONSE TO “SO GAY…….”**

One of the areas of interest to this study was the manifestation of homophobic bullying, given the assumption that it provides a measure of heteronormativity in a school and because it might be a force in the silencing of differences. Since the state in which the interviews for this study were conducted recently passed legislation protecting enumerated student minorities, the rhetoric against put-downs based on gender or sexuality appears to have intensified, prompting the question as to how the social workers perceive the extent of homophobic bullying in their schools.

Several of the interviewees stated that the term “gay” is occasionally directed as a slur against self-identified homosexual or gender-variant students. However, its use as a generic put-down seems much more frequent and quite pervasive, especially in urban schools. This finding is of obvious concern, as the use of homophobic language also seems to be associated with aggression and multiple bullying roles (see, for example, Poteat & Rivers, 2010). While, on the surface, the phenomenon of extensive homophobic language use would give credence to the characterization of (urban) schools as heteronormative, it is interesting to note that the social workers practicing there report higher levels of diversity and acceptance of differences, including those based on gender and sexuality, than was reported for the suburban schools. While further exploration of this observation falls outside of the scope of this study, diversity, acceptance, and
heteronormativity may well be multi-dimensional constructs, involving overt (homophobic language, or its absence) and covert (the intangible variables that make up school climate) factors. As Sabrina (urban, high school) observed in comparing her school with the suburban school attended by her own children:

…. my own children attend __________ High School (a suburban school), and I don’t think my children have had as much exposure, so there’s not as much flexibility in thinking…. they might think they are flexible, but I don’t know what they’d be like on the ground…. you know, feet on the ground…. whereas here, I don’t think there is as much acceptance for bullying, or open racism, or homophobia, or hurtful things going on….  

Given reports of the pervasive use of homophobic language, particularly in the urban schools, the question arises as to how social workers and other staff members respond to it. All of the social workers in this study indicated some kind of response, although it seemed to be more or less perfunctory at times. Most commonly, the response was described as a form of reprimand, paired with some kind of sanction, especially in the case of repeat offenders. Connie (urban, k-8) said this about what happens:

It depends. It depends on so many things…. sometimes it's just kids, just calling each other names. To me it doesn't mean anything, because it never really bothered me. I know personally, I don't jump on every little thing I hear. Some staff people respond to every little thing.... so it depends. This should be a blanket rule…. but there are so many kids. I think most people call kids on it, except when on the playground and it's just a million kids. It’s pretty pervasive. The n-
word is the one they really jump on…. and it's not accepted if they make fun of
the Muslim kids….. that is sometimes taken a little bit more seriously, like if
they call him a terrorist or something like that…. but “fag” is with “that fatty” and
“ugly”….

Tracy (urban, middle school), in response to the question as to whether or not teachers
respond to every single putdown they hear, stated:

Not every single one .... honestly, in these hallways, sometimes you hear “f....you”
and the n-word.... you know, you have everything.... and then it's.... you hear that,
and.... when I'm around kids and I hear something, I'll say “excuse me”.... and I'll
say something like that to them.... but it's one of those things too, if you don't
know their names and you don't know if it's an ongoing issue.... it's one of those
“How do I address it?.... 'cause I don't even know who that little kid is”.

Susan (urban, middle school) agreed that sex and gender put-downs in her school are
common and that they are not consistently responded to:

Not in the way that we should…. but I think it’s mainly because the disciplinary
issues in this school are so many and often for physical things…. so of course
that’s what we respond to more immediately, the fights and the threats, something
like that …. I would say that if you walk in the hall, in the three minutes between
classes, you are going to hear all kinds of slurs …. terrible things the kids say, and
unfortunately…. it’s so unfortunate, but so much of it just gets dismissed and that
is terrible…. I hate to admit that, but the things that come out of these kids’
mouths, they are terrible….they are just so inappropriate…. they are, I mean, the
gay slurs …. that’s certainly part of it…. that’s not all that you hear, but it’s
definitely a big part of it…. I think that we want to address it more than we can and more than we do…. it’s just so hard though…. we pick our battles here, we really do…. and if we are going to make a discipline referral for every time we hear the word faggot or the n-word…. it’s just that there would never be any teaching going on …. so I feel like some of it we just kind of accept, that there are things that we are not necessarily going to change and …. we have to focus on the things that we can…. I don’t know if that sounds hopeless (laughs nervously), but the reality is…. when we hear kids’s say “gay” or “faggot” or any number of words that we wish they didn’t say…. I personally will turn and say “excuse me”…. it’s not that we don’t try to acknowledge it, it’s just that the amount of things that you hear…. I’ll be the first to admit, you get a little desensitized, there’s no question…. and it’s what they hear at home, it’s their language…. As reported by the social workers in this study, it seemed less common for incidents involving homophobic language to be treated as “teachable moments”, in which students are educated about sexual diversity and the hurtful impact of using a term like “gay” in a negative context. However, Sonya (urban, k-8) did talk about her efforts in that regard:

Kids are constantly “He is gay, this one is gay, that one is gay” …. and I constantly talk to them about that word…. it's a word, we can use it …. but we don't use it, you know, to put someone down …. it's not the equivalent of stupid …. they use it like it's another adjective for stupid or lame if we mean to say stupid or lame, we can say stupid or lame…. if we mean to talk about someone who likes
someone of the same sex as them, then we can use the word gay…. it's just like too commonly used, so you are out like constantly having that conversation…. 

”It's not a bad word .... it's a word you are using improperly” .... because I feel like teachers will say that's a bad word and they don't explain: “It's not a bad word, they are just not using it in an okay context” ....

(….) .... actually, recently we have had that discussion with a couple of staff and they…. I don't think…. people just kind of react and don't really think about what they are saying …. because of all this bullying stuff that kind of has come about, a few of us were discussing it …. and they were talking about how they shush kids from saying “Oh, that is gay and this is gay”.... and I said “Don't shush them from saying it.... it's not a bad word, you need to explain that they are just using it the wrong way”.... I think sometimes teachers are just pressed for time and don't always think about these things in their responses....

Sabrina (urban, high school) also seemed to feel that education about homophobic and other offensive language is important in her setting:

I work in a self-contained room with twelve children…. one of the boys is a very flamboyant, very out, homosexual male, who in the beginning, when he first joined the program…. I had to have a sit-down…. and be like “This is why we don’t use that language in the room”…. and it took a while for the kids…. not to call him that name, but not to call each other that name…. and that’s where I think the sensitivity and awareness, that calling each other that name or a derogatory name, that actually refers to someone who self-identities like that in a positive way, was rude....
By contrast, several of the social workers indicated a lack of comfort with the educational approaches to homophobic bullying described above. Thus, Connie (urban, k-8) suggested that an extended discussion of gender and sexual putdowns might not happen because it could lead to controversy:

Well, whenever a kid uses the word around me, like in “he's so gay”, I'll ask him “What does that mean?”…. then he’ll say “That's when a boy likes a boy”….” So what's wrong with that? I don't think it's bad”…. and then I sort of give my little spiel about how I feel about it…. but very, very soft…. and I don't beat them over the head with it …. it's one of those little sensitive topics, because I worry that kids will go home and will say something to their parents, in this particular school….

A similar sentiment was described by Connie (urban, k-8) with respect to her role in educating students:

Yes…. and I do that when it comes up in the group…. like “Have you known anybody who is gay….” Yes, my uncle is a fag”….” Well, what does that mean? Has he ever hurt you …. has he ever been mean to anyone?”…. “No, but he's a fag”. So you explore what that means…. but that's more informal, not in a big group. You don't want to, really, because there are such varied opinions …. everyone can agree you don't make fun of someone because they're fat or they are bald or they wear glasses…. but the gay thing, there are some adults that think it's wrong, that it's abnormal and it's not acceptable, and they don't want their kid to be told that it's an option and that it's okay…. that's my opinion.

In addition, Monica’s (urban, elementary) observation implied that teachers, for the same
reason, also may avoid classroom discussions of “gay” as a put-down:

…. so I think that if it’s out there, then the teacher would address it…. but if it’s not something that came out in front of the whole class, they try very hard to not introduce ideas…. you know, that might not be there…. so there are so many situations that teachers just have to use their own judgment on how to get through their day, without adding more chaos…. I think if it’s out there and makes sense to talk about it, most of our staff would feel comfortable doing that…. but if it’s just someone who comes in and says “He called me gay”…. the teacher would just handle it between those two kids….

The comments cited above indicate that several of the study’s participants even view teaching about the terms gay, lesbian, and transgender as something that is subject to silencing. Overall then, the lack of meaningful discourse about gender and sexuality maintains the heteronormative status quo. Just how the school social workers respond to and support gender-variant students, given this context, will be explored next.

**THEME #3: SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE WITH GENDER-VARIANT STUDENTS**

For this study, the assumption was made that social work with and on behalf of gender-variant youth would require a practice framework rooted in respect for diversity and acceptance of difference. Moreover, as a rather new area of practice, another assumption concerned requirements for self-awareness and affective engagement on the part of the social workers. Referred to as a “virtue-ethics” model of multi-cultural practice (Fowers & Davidov, 2006; see the chapter on this study’s theoretical framework), these components are thought to elevate the social work interventions
beyond the application of mere skills and thereby increase their effectiveness. Based on this theoretical rationale, a subset of questions in the interview protocol used for this study focused on the social workers’ understanding of gender variance as an emerging phenomenon among youth, the way they make sense of it and engage with it.

**SUBTHEME: SOCIAL WORKERS MAKING SENSE OF GENDER VARIANCE**

In terms of theoretical explanation, the vast majority of the sample described gender variance as a biological phenomenon, often making the analogy with sexual orientation, sometimes specifically in reference to a *continuum* of gender expression. In other words, the social workers in this study mostly viewed gender identity and gender variance as innate, and not as something that people choose or are led to, as exemplified by Sonya’s (urban, k-8) response:

> I think it's just the way a person is .... I think they are born that way whether they were born with one set of, you know, genitalia, and they feel a certain way.... I really…. I just think it's kind of who they are and how they were born, whatever their desired gender is …. I think that is something that's predetermined..

Monica (urban, elementary), when asked how to explain why a child might feel as if “in the wrong body”, said:

> …. Well, I think that that definitely happens…. I think that that definitely happens…. whether it’s a little chromosome, whatever…. but I think that that definitely happens for people…. that they are, that they’re born feeling like you said…. like they’re not in the right skin…. and that must be a terrible feeling, to kind of sort through your life like that, especially as a child….

Tracy (urban, middle school) discussed her ideas regarding the origins of gender identity
and gender variance by referring to her own daughter’s behavior:

.... but I don't know where it comes from, because I'm trying to, like, let her experience it all in and see where she wants to go, but she's definitely more drawn towards the female stuff, stereotypically.... I don't have any belief that, you know, somebody turned you that way.... I believe that's just how we were born.

Cynthia (urban, elementary) made the point that, since being transgender involves so many hardships, it is difficult to conceive of it as a matter of choice:

.... I am of the belief that, to me, logically, it makes no sense that someone would report that they feel that way, knowing the ridicule, knowing the obstacles that they would have, if it really was out of their control (given the context, it appeared Cynthia meant to say “under their control”).... so, my belief is that it’s not something that they just want, it’s something that is an innate feeling.... does that make sense?

April (urban, pre-k-8) was one of the social workers who invoked the notion of a continuum to explain sexual and gender identity:

.... I think from the get-go, I remember way back in undergraduate, I remember taking a human sexuality class....I just remember learning that sexuality is on a continuum, that whole concept....and I think it really helped me, personally and with friends and family.... that whole idea that people want to label themselves as one or the other or something.... and I think the idea that there is a continuum and that we are all different has kind of opened the doors for people to realize some other things on a more significant level, like “I’m the wrong gender”....

When asked about the origins of gender-variant behavior, April – while stating a belief in
“nature” – hesitated and qualified her views as follows:

…. the behavior of just kind of choosing…. or not choosing…. because I don’t think it’s a choice…. (hesitation)…. it depends on the age, because obviously different things happen during, you know, teenage years, in terms of rebellion…. and sometimes you have to weed through that…. the kids have decided that they’re bisexual, but really they are just kind of wanting to identify with a certain group, or people who dress in a certain way…. maybe they feel it, maybe some of them don’t…. but they want to belong somewhere…. because, you know, the misfits and outcasts…. they are very welcoming, they are a very welcoming group in terms of “come on in”…. so I think they may kind of get wrapped up in that…. some of the younger ones…. (hesitation)…. I don’t know…. I think some of the younger ones stand their ground because this is just what they want …. 

April’s almost “queer” qualification of agency in terms of identity was in a subtle, but important way different from the perspective of Stacy (rural-suburban elementary school) who, while stating a belief in gender variance as a biological phenomenon added significant contingencies in terms of its manifestation among children:

How do I see it? Well, I think depending on where on the spectrum, so to speak, persons who have transgender issues or who identify as gay and lesbian…. I see that as a biological constitution…. it’s who they are, it’s how they are born…. and so that’s who they are, that’s simply who they are…. children who are perhaps experimenting or trying out different…. you know… I don’t know that that’s as well defined yet at that age, certainly not for me…. so I think about that differently…. I just think about that differently….
Interviewer: Meaning younger kids, or….

Stacy: Yeah, yeah…. younger kids.

Prior to that response, Stacy, in discussing a hypothetical disclosure of gender dysphoria by one of her students, had mentioned the need to rule out sexual abuse, suggesting that as a causative or contributing factor. This suggestion was also made by Courtney (suburban, middle school), who professed that gender variance was at odds with her religious beliefs. Courtney was the only social worker in the study’s sample who explicitly stated the view of gender variance as resulting from environmental factors, trauma in particular:

.... well, I don’t think that I believe the way most social workers believe, because I think I am a more conservative person than most social workers are…. but I think a lot of those issues have to do with abuse, having been sexually abused…. and also seeing dysfunctional relationships in the home…. and…. I don’t think…. this is probably not a politically correct thing to say…. but I don’t think God makes mistakes…. I think God makes who He makes and that’s who we are…. I mean, I have known people who are transsexual, whatever the correct term is…. and I think it’s…. really, it has got to be horribly tough for them…. so I don’t know…. I guess…. I mean my heart goes out to people that feel they’re born in the wrong body, but I don’t…. it’s certainly not my area of expertise, but my personal value is…. God made them the way they are, so….

Interviewer: “The way they are”, meaning…?

Courtney: The body they were born with…. maybe some therapy would help them to accept that, I don’t know…. I haven’t really come across that here at
Finally, Brenda (urban, elementary), as part of her explanation of gender variance, stated that some boys may express cross-gender feelings because they perceive certain advantages in being a girl, a view that to some extent seems to be reflected in the previously cited research concerning boys in an English primary school resisting masculine culture (Renold, 2004). In Brenda’s words:

I had one little boy who really wanted to be a girl, and we would talk about that…. and he was in kindergarten, first grade…. and he would say “I want to be a girl…. I really want to be a girl”…. and his parents were like “Okay”, you know, they…. this was years ago…. this was, seriously, he is like thirty five…. they were like “Well, you’re a boy and…. ”….but they didn’t stop him from playing in girls’ things, and he’d go to the housekeeping corner and play, and all the girls liked him…. he now has grown up to be…. he is a gay man, he has his doctorate, and he works at the University of [name of university]. So on top of that…. so I think, you also were, on top of everything else, this really bright kid that did not fit in because of how bright you were, with the average kid…. so I wonder, what I wonder is for him…. because I do know the longevity of his case…. if part of the reason he also wanted to play with the girls was that they were just smarter, or more attuned to whatever it was…. so it’s hard for me to tease out, for him…. because he doesn’t want to be a girl anymore…. he is happy who he is, but at that time it was really very verbal…. “I want to be a girl…. I want to be a girl”…. so I’m not…. I don’t feel like I’ve had, that I’m aware
of….I don’t feel I’ve worked with a kid other than him, who really will say it that clearly…. it’s more like “It’s easier being a girl”…. they’ll say “Oh, if I were a girl….”, you know, whatever…. but not really in conflict to the degree that I think they’re in turmoil…. that I’ve been exposed to….

As with all social work interventions, thoughts about the etiology of an issue form the foundation for subsequent action. Thus, having explored how the social workers think about the origins of gender identity and expression, the interviews proceeded with questions about the way they have, or would have, responded to gender-variant behavior or disclosures of gender dysphoria.

**SUBTHEME: THE SOCIAL WORK RESPONSE TO GENDER VARIANCE**

So how have the social workers in this sample responded to gender-variant students, or – if not yet encountered – how would they respond hypothetically? When asked this question, all of the social workers indicated strong support and engagement, as well as a firm commitment to advocacy within the school setting. Universally, the social workers would allow the student to explore the issue further in an atmosphere of acceptance and support. As described previously, only two of the respondents stated that they would want to rule out a history of sexual abuse. It should be noted that this is not typically included in best practice protocols (to the extent they exist) and that, based on anecdotal reports, parents of gender-variant youth would probably find that suggestion offensive.

While most of the social workers felt strongly about the need to involve parents at
some point, especially if the child was younger, they would generally allow the student to lead in that respect. Sabrina (urban, high school) related the experience with a student who came out in a journal that she shared:

Well, with that student, I validated her perspective…. it’s confidential, you know, it’s a counseling session…. as long as I’m sure the student is safe, there is no reason for me to ever reach out to the parent for any of this stuff…. and even if it were a safety issue, I don’t think I would lead with gender, I think I would lead with safety…. I encourage kids to talk and think about it, and feel it and be authentic…. I tell them it’s normal, I tell them they are normal…. that they should strive to be fun, and explore who they are, and love themselves…. regardless of what other people think or do or say…. so….

Sabrina also mentioned the possible drawbacks of parent involvement in terms of its unpredictable consequences:

I have some parents who are phenomenal supporters of their own children…. I also have some parents who are emotionally and physically abusive of their children around those issues…. and I say it’s emerging in this community as something that people are more aware of, but I’ve been very sad this year about how many kids have become suicidal, or run away from home…. or just in general deny who they are, because they’re afraid of their parents response…. and they correctly judged their parents…. which makes me sad, because a lot of times we talk in GSA or in group about “Well, maybe you’re not giving them enough credit, maybe they can handle this”…. and then they come back and tell us what happened when they tried to talk with their parents…. it was heart breaking…. 
because I’m pretty optimistic that most parents are going to love their kids, no matter what…. and I think they do, I just think they’re scared…. 

Support for the parents themselves was suggested by several of the social workers. Safety issues were mentioned across the board, particularly with respect to the use of bathrooms and locker rooms. Most of the social workers would explore other support within the school, be it staff or accepting peers. Questions of who to inform, and how, were raised speculatively, while social transitions (change of name and pronouns, change of clothing and hair style) were described as problematic by almost all of the respondents. Tara (suburban, elementary), when asked how she would respond if a child, with parental support, wanted to transition, stated:

If I were to be honest, I would say that we would be following the parents’ wishes, but I have a feeling that there would be a lot of talk behind closed doors.

Interviewer: As a social worker, what do you think you would have to do then, in that situation? 

Tara: To help the child?.... Well, as you’re saying this there are a few things that come to mind…. one, I would be calling the parents in to come up with a plan that they are comfortable with…. one of which, I think, would be a classroom conversation, to talk to the students to insure a lack of bullying there…. to be honest with you, I’m not sure how that conversation would go…. but I recognize that that’s where I would start…. I think…. maybe even prior to that conversation, actually, would be the teacher conversation to explain that this is the child’s want, and the family’s want…. and we will follow their wishes…. and I think there
would need to be a reinforcement of confidentiality…. in that “I don’t want to hear you talking about this child…. I don’t want anybody overhearing you talking about this child”…. you know, just a reminder of some of those protocols. Potentially…. I also think the child would need some…. almost scripts…. of like, “What do you say if someone says this…. how could you handle it if”…. so not necessarily counseling because they had a problem, but more of a “Let’s kind of brainstorm what could be some potential pitfalls for you”…. 

Monica (urban, elementary) was an exception in this sample of social workers in terms of her optimism about the possibility of a fairly smooth transition. Responding to the hypothetical scenario of a child wanting to transition at her particular school, she spontaneously brainstormed several concrete interventions to make that happen:

My goodness…. you know, it’s hard to think about at an elementary level, although I’m sure it does happen…. but I think if the parents were on board with it, then we could do it, in a very planful, supportive way…. and I imagine that that would look like a meeting with the parents and the student and myself, and the principal maybe, and the nurse maybe…. and I would also think that maybe I would go into the classroom and kind of do just some preliminary work about what was going to be happening, and what the student was going to be sharing with us, and what might be some feelings that they would have about that…. and, you know, that all our feelings are okay…. it’s very important that we know what our feelings are, so we can help our friends…. and then if they have feelings about it, then there are people that they can talk to as well…. and even tough this person that we care about is going to be talking to us about some things that may
not make us feel totally comfortable, it is our friend…. and we want to be there for our friends…. and that most things will stay the same…. like, they are still going to come to school…. they are still going to sit at their desk…. they are still going to want to sit with you at lunch…. their appearance might look different…. they might choose a different name…. so I think that…. I feel very good about this school…. I feel that something like that could happen at this school…. I might kind of be pie in the sky, because it never has happened….

It is interesting to note that Monica’s optimistic scenario in fact agrees with the experiences of professionals in the field who have been facilitating gender transitions and promoting gender-inclusive schools (Baum, 2013). Describing how the process of coming out and transitioning might be different at the secondary level, Sabrina (urban, high school) mentioned that, in her setting, members of the GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) support and mentor other students:

…. you know, it depends on the natural support systems they have…. I do try to encourage all the kids to come to the GSA if they’re going through the coming-out process, because to have your peers around you, who will give you real-life experience-sharing and support in the moment…. you know, most of the kids do have my personal cell to text me after hours if there is an emergency, but I’m a ______ year old mom that lives out on ___________ , you know what I mean.... I think it’s much more meaningful if you’re having a hard time with the coming-out process to text your best friend or somebody from GSA…. I do pair kids up, with older students…. the younger students and mentors…. and that has been very successful for kids during the coming-out process, to have a mentor in the
building that they can go to if they feel they’re being bullied or harassed….

However, Sabrina added: … most of the issues are home issues and not school issues, during the coming-out process….

A couple of social workers noted that specific (mental health) counseling for gender-variant students might not be indicated, but that it would be helpful if the student had “scripts” to counter questions or even bullying. Tammy (urban, elementary) was one of the respondents who noted that gender variance in itself would not necessarily imply the existence of a problem:

Is it really interfering with everybody else’s schooling?…. is it interfering with the students’ academics?…. you know, let’s be a little bit more flexible…. so I would hope that people would see me as kind of bringing a little bit more reason to the table, and really thinking things through and looking at the options, and really deciding “is this really a big issue?”

Tracy (urban, middle school), along similar lines, suggested that it would be both presumptuous and inappropriate to initiate a conversation about gender variance with an individual student:

No, I wouldn't bring it up…. like I've had a girl come into my office…. shaved head, completely…. pants down to where, you know, as low as she could get them…. and if you look at her it seems like she wants to be perceived as a boy, you know….. the way she's dressing and the way she's acting…. but would I bring it up to her? No…. I would let her talk to me about it if it was a struggle for her.

The ways the social workers in this study indicated they have, or would have
responded to gender variance in their schools demonstrate their adherence to important professional values, such as self-determination and worth of the individual. This finding is congruent with a general picture that emerged during the research process. The school social workers all came across as devoted, hard-working professionals, eager to solve problems, and actively supporting students who deal with the effects of poverty, mental health issues, and various forms of marginalization. They are clearly in the forefront of the struggle to make education an equitable undertaking. This observation was also reinforced by some of the – admittedly superficial – glimpses into their world at work. Most of the interviews were conducted at the schools where the participants were employed, making it possible to witness the warm interaction with a student in the hallway, the quick consultation with a teacher “on the fly”, the informal chat with parents out on the sidewalk, at dismissal time; making it possible also to note how social workers stayed late for meetings with the principal or hurried out after school for a home visit.

Given the commitment of the social workers to their students and to their profession, it seemed important to also examine how comfortable and competent they feel stepping into this new area of practice, social work with gender-variant youth. How confident and prepared are they in terms of engaging with these students? Again, engagement here is conceptualized as part of a “virtue ethics” approach to social work practice. Do these social workers feel that they have the understanding and awareness required to “do it right”? Or would they like more training regarding issues of gender variance among youth? Do they feel that they need a “readiness process”, some kind of counseling in order to “wrap their head” around these issues? These are the questions addressed in the following section.
**SUBTHEME: STEPS TO UNDERSTANDING AND ENGAGEMENT**

Judging from the interview responses, the school social workers in this study appear rather well positioned to engage with gender-variant students in a way resembling the “virtue ethics” model. For example, almost all of them expressed an understanding of the etiology of gender variance that is consistent with current scientific thinking. All of them appeared to have an appreciation of what it means to be marginalized along the lines of sexuality and gender. All of them were able to articulate interventions in support of gender-variant students. All of them seemed willing to advocate on behalf of individual minority students. In addition, most of them were able to identify the need for additional training or verbalized their willingness to seek out consultation and supervision.

However, a couple of the social workers in the study appeared to have some difficulty reconciling the notion of gender variance with their personal values. Of these, Courtney (suburban, middle school) seemed to struggle the most. For example, when asked if her beliefs would prevent her from fully engaging with a transgender student, Courtney’s reply was compassionate, but showed some elements of disapproval:

… Well, I guess based on what I told you earlier that I am a strong believer in how a loving community and a loving support network can really help…. everyone, children and adults…. to thrive , and to be healed, and to be fully successful…. I guess I would want the school to be as supportive as they could be…. it’s just…. you know, it would boggle my mind to think of any parent allowing a 13 or a 14-year old to have their body mutilated to be in a gender…. 
that they think they might have been born as a mistake…. and I just can’t even
wrap my brain around that…. I would at least want to say to the parents “Just let
your child mature, and get them into some psychotherapy to explore the issue…. I
can’t imagine any doctor doing a sex change operation…. I think at the high
school there are some kids that definitely feel they were born in the wrong
body…. I’ve seen them…. I’ve seen some kids that…. I don’t know, I think the
people that I’ve seen out in public…. and I admit, I’m a small-town woman,
but…. I’ve seen what I think are transvestites, you know, like in stores and things
like that…. and I always feel like, the men anyway…. they are trying so much
harder than a biological woman would try…. because, I mean, we throw our hair
in a ponytail, and maybe go out of the house without make-up or something …. 
but when I see people that I think are probably transvestites, they are always
dressed to the nines…. you know…. in a beautiful dress, and high heels or…. you
know, something a little more sexy…. make-up and hair done…. and I think,
wow, they’re really trying hard…. but there is always something about them
that’s not quite feminine…. so it’s just…. yeah, it is difficult to understand…. 
Tara’s (suburban, elementary) hesitation was more subtle, and came out in response to a
follow-up question in the excerpt below, in which she discusses her feelings about
parenting and gender variance:

…. and I think that’s kind of the angle where I would be going to…. is more the
empathetic route of  “If this were my child, what would I hope to be saying, what
would I want from the school?”…. I think that would be where I would go…. you
know, that would be what I would try to figure out…. I don’t think…. I hope that
my reaction with the child…. I don’t think that would be where I need to do my soul searching…. I think it would be more “Okay…. how do I help the parents, because it’s going to be a lifetime struggle for them as well”….

Interviewer: Would you ever think “How can they allow this….?”

Tara: I may question “How do you know at such a young age, that this is truly what they want?”…. and I would have a conversation with them about that…. ’cause my son…. as they are telling me the things they want, or believe to be true for them, at a young age…. in my head I know…. ”Well, we’ll see”…. and so, I would ask “But how do you know whether this is one of those ‘We’ll see if you’ll really grow up to be a rock star’…. or know that this is truly how they feel?”

Several of the respondents reflected on situations involving gender variance or sexual diversity in their own family or among their friends or acquaintances, as a means to gain more understanding. Dawn (urban, elementary) for example, whose prior comments seemed to show some confusion about gender and sexuality, talked about her own daughter with both insight and acceptance:

We have four children and our youngest, (…. since she was in second grade she has given us some clues that she is probably not in that box of typical female…. we are not sure where she's going to end up .... we thought for a long time she's probably gay .... she said things in an innocent way that I thought “Well, that's really different” .... and we have good friends that are a gay couple, and I said to one of them “What do you think about this?” .... in second grade, that she tells me that when she takes her chair.... she helped Sophie get her chair down.... and she said, “mom, I felt all kind of warm and fuzzy inside when I did that ….
felt really good”…. and I thought “Hey, that's interesting”, you know.... And so we have kind of had our eyes on her all along, to see where this is going to go, and what her interests are in boys and girls…. and she's a very athletic kid and she is a very smart kid, and I'm not sure where we're going to end up with her ....but I think it's taking it through my paces, in terms of just looking at all kids as kind of who they are and waiting to see where they go ....and I think for our daughter too…. and she is not even sure where she's going to end up, so.... and we love to put anybody in a box and say “This is who you are” .... and we couldn't, especially now at this tender age.... but I think the ideas are out there now for kids to grasp that they may not be the typical female or male and I think that's a great thing…. more acceptance …. more awareness I think too, for kids, that we didn't have at their age…. and that there are other options and possibilities, and that's okay…. I can't tell you how many times we've said to our poor kid “Whatever you decide is great with us.... and we have said it in different ways and forms…. and she's like “What are you talking about?”(....) I think things are really changing....

Tracy (urban, middle school) talked about someone she played sports with and about how difficult it can be to make sense of gender identity, especially if the issue of attraction is mixed in:

I think it makes it harder because of, you know, my own lack of knowledge…. because I have had friends that identified with being a woman but dating a transgender who was a man, now is a woman, or was a woman and now is a man…. so I think it's just that piece that's is difficult to understand to some extent …. than I've also had friends where it's like “but you are just in love with the
person”…. and I get that, I totally get that …. it doesn't matter who they are, you are just in love with the person…. so I think it's just lack of knowledge and lack of education, yes…. I might have some friends, but that doesn't mean I know anything, really …. I can just speak to their piece of what they told me and how they felt…..

Brenda (urban, elementary) referred to her acquaintance with a transgender salesperson in a local business and an incident of discrimination that she observed:

There was a man who became a woman at my liquor store…. it sounds funny, but he was…. she…. I knew him, he was a man…. and I watched as he transitioned into a woman…. that was probably two or three years…. and now completely is a woman…. and I witnessed when…. this is always the hard part…. she was in transition, some customer being so rude, like an idiot…. and I said something like…. and she was like “People can be so awful”, or something…. and I said “I know…. well, he’s an idiot”…. you know, that’s all I could say…. now I always go to her…. we have no relationship other than I buy wine there (laughs)…. 

The need for some kind of counseling in traversing the terrain of gender variance was expressed by a couple of the social workers. For instance, Stacy (rural-urban, elementary), when asked if gender variance would be a foreign concept that would require her to go through some process of “personal readiness”, responded confidently at first, but hesitated upon further reflection:

No, I really don’t think it would…. I’m very comfortable around…. perhaps transgender, just because that’s so significant…. I see that perhaps as a different category than homosexuality, but for students who believe they’re homosexual….
no, I’m totally comfortable with that…. I think the transgender, it’s just…. I wouldn’t know…. I don’t see homosexuality as needing, to tell you the truth, any special skills, you know…. whereas transgender is just a bigger issue…. that I’m just more uncertain about what’s important….

Stacy added:

I would probably seek some guidance on that…. not because I’m uncomfortable with it, but just because I…. it’s new…. and unfamiliar, yeah….

Along similar lines, Tammy (urban, elementary) suggested the need for counseling or supervision to stay “grounded”: If I’m telling my clients and my students to go to counseling, I have no problem going myself…. and I think that’s a really important thing for people in this field to do, because the burnout rate is really high…. and I think that can help keep people grounded, especially when you’re dealing with issues where there is not a lot of familiarity, yes absolutely…. and help people process through…. have somebody, a neutral party process through your thinking…. like ….biases do come up, you might not think of them on your own, but having somebody come ask questions that you might not have even thought about…. things come up, so I would think about that…. like in supervision…. like a parallel process….

Several of the social workers mentioned a need for some specific training with regard to gender variance. Brenda (urban, elementary) stated: I definitely think there is room for more training…. and then also I think a component is effectively advocating…. and really dealing with your staff, parents,
administration, in terms of that…. because truthfully, my experience with any issue is, as long as I am managing it well, nobody seems to care…. or if the perception is I’m managing it well, whatever……but they start to care when parents become irate and call the superintendent…. or the kid gets worse, which of course…. you know what I’m saying?…..so I never feel I can’t approach any subject, but I’m also pretty confident…. and I feel like, at all cost, I’m going to advocate for this kid…. to the degree…. I mean, I don’t want to ruin…. I want to advocate so they can go back into their system whole, as opposed to…. when I say at all cost, I don’t really mean at all cost…. I don’t want them to be unraveling in their homes, you know….

Tracy (urban, middle school) suggested that “more knowledge is power” and that any system change would require…. …. just more education…. getting more education…. more, like real people coming in and saying what their experience was and how it has affected their lives…. and just what help they could have had, especially in the middle school years or the elementary years…. and just giving like a real snapshot of “This is what I went through and this is what helped me and this didn't help me” or, you know…. just giving a true picture.

Susan (urban, middle school) stated that training about gender variance would be helpful just in advancing acknowledgement and discussion of the issues involved:

Certainly…. and I think more than anything, why it would be so helpful…. is because it will get us thinking about things differently than maybe we already do…. meaning, I guess, really until this, I haven’t really thought about things this
way…. I haven’t really thought about gender variance all that much, other than the obvious kids that we have here, dressing differently or things like that…. but I think that training would certainly be helpful, definitely…. I guess just more open discussion…. having it be a topic that we discuss at all, might be a place to start…. the reality is that this is the first time I’ve ever talked about gender variance in this school setting…. we have all different sorts of committees and it’s never really been brought up this way…. so I guess just getting the conversation going, starting to talk about these kids and how invisible or visible it really is…. and just starting to kind of raise awareness about it, I guess that would be where I would start…. I think there’s always room to talk about it, absolutely …. 

April (urban, pre-k through 8), acknowledged the potential usefulness of more training, but also suggested a reality check with respect to the scope of such an effort:

Yeah, yeah…. I just think people are so overwhelmed…. I look at the teachers and I am like “Oh my God, I’m so glad I’m not you”…. they are just piled on with expectations, and grades, and [evaluations]…. I mean there are some really incredible teachers in (name of district) and they want to think about the kids, but they are so bogged down…. and I think they would be open to think about certain concepts with the kids, but we are all so much…. they are just focused on doing what they need to do…. and some of us as social workers are so overwhelmed with crisis intervention that we don’t have the time…. you need time to step back to do trainings, and say “Let’s think about the kids…. let’s think about some of the things you are seeing and about students you might be thinking of, who might
fall into this category, who might be at risk because they are kind of out of the norm…. and the stereotypes…. and might need some extra…. ”….I mean, we’ve got kids…. their house is burnt down, you know…. the parent is missing…. and it’s a shame, because you don’t feel you accomplish much, you know, at the end of the day…. but I think that ideally, maybe if the funding…. please let us get more funding…. if the funding starts to kind of come back and we start getting more adults in the school, just for supervision and to take care of some tasks that other people…. could be freed up to do some of this stuff…..

When asked the question about more training and education, a couple of the study’s participants expressed the opinion that this would be most appropriate for social workers at the secondary level. However, Sonya (urban, high school) made the suggestion to offer training to all school staff, given the need for early identification and intervention:

Yeah…. what’s sad that they don’t understand is…. is that the kids with identity issues and gender…. well, I’m just going to say gender identity issues…. by the time they hit high school, if they haven’t gotten support…. they all end up in the hospital…. they become suicidal…. they feel really isolated…. they feel invisible. (….). Yeah, I think it’s about mental health…. and their disenfranchisement…. they’re homeless, their parents kick them out…. poverty?.…. you want to see poverty?…. kids living on the street at sixteen…. and I see a lot of those kids…. we take them to shelters…. I wish they would prioritize it…. but I think if you opened it up to the entire faculty…. yeah, you’d get interested people…. and it doesn’t necessarily have to be a social worker that’s doing this work…. you know, we need to have caring adults everywhere willing to do the work and come
With respect to further training, one issue would seem particularly relevant, namely the aforementioned confusion between gender identity and sexual identity. During the interviews, the social workers were asked about the relationship between gender and sexuality in an abstract sense and in terms of its impact on what students are taught (or not) in public schools. In their responses to these questions, as well as in other comments throughout the interviews, this issue emerged as confounding for quite a few of the social workers. Since the inappropriate linking of gender identity and sexual identity is likely to lead to a misinterpretation of gender variance, the following section will explore that theme in more depth.

**THEME #4: THE MISINTERPRETATION OF GENDER VARIANCE**

As part of the conversation about their theoretical explanation of gender variance, the social workers in this study also discussed their views on the relationship between gender and sexuality. As already cited in previous quotes, this issue came up unsolicited on several occasions because of a participant’s automatic labeling of an alternative gender expression as “gay”, or “lesbian”, or “homosexual”. In other instances, I specifically asked about a perceived link between gender and sexuality, from both a theoretical and a practical angle (the latter in the sense that, by connecting gender with sexuality, the prospects of teaching about gender variance in a public school setting seem to diminish considerably). Following some of the responses from the social workers, an additional conceptual framework, “homonormativity”, will be introduced here to provide some
context for their comments. Among these was Sonya’s (urban, k-8) attempt to distinguish between gender identity and sexual identity:

I'm not naïve or anything, but the truth…. I think people should be free to love whoever or whatever gender…. but I could see where people who, you know, vary from their gender kind of run into, you know …. have to deal with their gender and then they have to do with this sexual preference too …. like how do I identify, what am I, so to speak…. I don’t really fit into this box or that box…. I might be a female or I might identify as a male, but I like men or I like women…. you know there are so many like, factors that play into it…. I think that…. but I know that my view is “you like who you like”…. I was born liking men and that's just kind of how I'm wired…. and you know, I was born identifying as a female…. but other people will feel differently or are just wired differently…. so they should be able to have whatever they want….

Tara (suburban, elementary) also distinguished between gender identity and sexual identity, but more in a functional rather than a conceptual way:

I do think they can sometimes be related…. however, I also think that there are people who are homosexual and don’t change their gender…. and I think that there are people who change their gender, that does not mean…. so I don’t think they are…. I don’t think one causes or leads to the other….

That functional take on the issue was also apparent in Monica’s (urban, elementary) response to the question whether or not it makes sense to her when people connect issues of gender to issues of sexuality:

I guess it could make sense…. I mean, I think if you feel that you’re trapped in
the wrong body, then your sexual preferences are going to be different as well…. you know, they are not going to align with how you look on the outside…. I think it all makes sense…. 

April (urban, pre-k-8) at first acknowledged a difference between gender identity and sexual identity, then qualified that distinction with respect to kids:

I know there is a difference…. and I think you tend to see it a little bit more clearly in adults, meaning to be able to separate the two out, in terms of people that are just, have characteristics…. like for males who are more feminine and that doesn’t necessarily mean they are gay…. I think that becomes a little bit more…. less blurred as adults, when you think about adults…. I think in kids, because they are evolving and I’m always wondering where, if there is somebody who is struggling with their sexuality, if it is a clue…. so I think that’s why it gets weaved in together for me…. but I also really try to encourage kids to realize that there are different sides to everybody, and encourage them to nurture those different sides…. 

A little later in the interview, still talking about the often presumed link between gender and sexuality, April added:

…. I definitely think that’s very hard for people to understand…. I think there is a lot of people that “you either are or you aren’t”…. and throwing anything else in the mix, like “I’m a girl, but I feel like I’m a boy”, I think adults have a real hard time with that…. and that’s actually the ones I would be more concerned about than anybody…. I mean in this day and age, where the teenagers are…. and they are a little bit more like free love, it’s a little bit going back to the sixties…. I
think that in some ways that’s positive, once you get over some of the hurdles of sixth grade…. sixth and seventh grade…. and then by eighth grade they all start kind of going “Well, yeah, you know….”….so it’s really the adults…. I think the adults are the problem….

Typically, the interviews revealed an automatic linking of gender and sexual identity, as demonstrated by this quote from Dawn (urban, elementary):

There was an older boy that I've worked with at another school who is, I believe,… gay, and a feminine gay boy.... and I worked with them when he was in fifth grade and sixth grade .... he is now in middle school…. he is very tall, so he looks older than he is…. and I would have to say maybe not flamboyantly gay…. but when you meet him, it's the first thing you think about…. because of the way he speaks.... he's also a very dramatic person, has a very dramatic presence.... I've wondered how life is going for him and I unfortunately don't know him well enough to be able to find out.... except I know he is struggling about going to school, according to mom, and I wonder if that's really it….

Susan, (urban, middle school), when asked how she explains gender variance, first stated her view on biological origins, but then elaborated with respect to same-sex attraction:

…. Well, I guess I always kind of come from the school of thought that people are acting…. that people are born the way that they are, you know…. I don’t really think that kids choose necessarily to be different than everybody else in this way…. I don’t think kids wake up one morning and say, a girl wakes up and says “I’m going to like girls today”…. you know, I think it’s just, they’re just following their emotions and their feelings…. I don’t know that it’s affected so
much by their environment…. I mean, I don’t know, I don’t know how I would explain it to myself…. I guess when the kid comes in…. and I haven’t had a whole lot of experience with it either, with kids coming to me talking about it…. on my caseload I don’t have a whole lot of kids that I think are gay or bisexual, at least they haven’t expressed it yet …. but I won’t think all that much about it, other than helping them process it…. I wouldn’t think that they are choosing it…. I just think that it’s a way of life, it’s their orientation, it is how they feel…. I also don’t know that we should be the ones to question how they are feeling or who they are attracted to….

Cynthia (urban, elementary) also made the spontaneous jump from gender to sexuality, but then acknowledged it when probed about it further:

Well, I mean …. when I think of those two boys from the middle school…. I do think they are different situations…. I don’t know, but I did say I wonder if they’re going to be gay…. I absolutely made that jump to…. I’d be curious if in a few years, if they are…. I guess I’d like to know what the correlation is…. if there is a correlation to gender…. I guess, I don’t know, you are right, they are two different things, but do they…. does that make sense?…. so yes, the one I think truly wants to be a girl, when I think about him…. and the other one…. I don’t know, I would say he’s more effeminate, right …. so I guess I’m making, I guess I need to keep them a little bit more separate….

An interesting example of how sexual orientation may be presumed based on stereotypical notions of gendered behavior can be found in a comment by Courtney (suburban, middle school), when asked about any previous training or course work
regarding gender or sexuality:

I had two professors who were gay…. my family behavior professor was gay…. Interviewer: And he was open about it?

Courtney: I’m trying to think if he was …. we all knew it…. I’m not sure how open he was at the time, but we just knew it…. it was kind of like an undercurrent of “Well, of course he is gay”, you know…. and then there was an adjunct professor that I had, who was…. a female, who was gay and…. at least I’m pretty sure she was…. I mean, I don’t know if she was ever open about it…. 

As the examples above indeed illustrate, one significant (and unanticipated) finding of this study concerns the linking of gender identity and sexual identity. As noted before, it is an understandable confusion given the congruence between gender-variant behavior and an alternative (for lack of a better word) sexual orientation on the part of some individuals (i.e. the “femme” gay guys and the “butch” lesbians). However, as advocates in the transgender community are fond of saying: Gender is between the ears, not the legs. Analyses of gender identity that stop short at the rather superficial levels of behavior or role, or of embodiment, seriously limit one’s understanding of gender variance.

Issues of gender identity, and transgender identity in particular, challenge the conventional gender binary (which is based on stereotypical behavior and roles, and on categorization according to embodiment). Reviewing transgender history in the context of queer politics, gender studies theorist and transgender advocate Susan Stryker noted:

In a contradictory environment simultaneously welcoming and hostile,
transgender activists staked their own claims to queer politics. We argued that sexual orientation was not the only significant way to differ from heteronormativity – that homo, hetero, and bi in fact all depended on similar understandings of “man” and “woman”, which trans problematized. People with trans identities could describe themselves as men and women, too – or resist binary categorization all together – but in doing either they queered the dominant relationship of sexed body and gendered subject (Stryker, 2008, pp. 146-147).

Stryker used the term “homonormativity” to describe an attempt, initially on the part of sexual minorities, to make “trans” into either a gender or sexual orientation category. Homonormativity thus became a vehicle toward assimilation. Ironically, in resisting this tendency, Stryker noted elsewhere, ‘transgender’ became “… the site in which to contain all gender trouble, thereby helping secure both homosexuality and heterosexuality as stable and normative categories of personhood” (Stryker, 2004, p. 214). As the homonormative critique suggests, the phenomenon of gender variance has far-reaching implications in terms of social categorization. It would seem that most of the social workers in the present study are not yet fully aware of this.
CHAPTER 6

Conclusions, Recommendations, Limitations/Need for Further Study

This final chapter will take a bird’s eye view of the data collected for this research. It should be kept in mind that the study was clearly meant to be exploratory and descriptive. The frequent use of quotes is reflective of that purpose; it is also consistent with the “idiographic” nature of the type of analysis that I used (Smith, 2004) and, as previously noted, with Queer theory’s position on “the voice” of research participants. That said, interpretative analysis of the data was attempted as well, leading to the significant and unexpected finding of “homonormativity” and its impact on the conceptualization of gender variance (and, presumably, one’s practice approach to issues of gender variance). What follows are the major conclusions with respect to the descriptive and interpretative analysis of the data, a brief discussion of the study’s limitations, and recommendations for practice and further research.

Conclusions

The research question posed in this study was as follows:

“How does the heteronormative environment of public education affect the perceptions, attitudes, and self-reported practices of a sample of school social workers in the Northeastern United States with respect to gender variance?” Subquestion: “How are the perceptions, attitudes and practices of the social workers in this sample mediated by professional and personal experiences?”

Answers to the questions stated above have to be nuanced given the research design and the variability in the sample. However, this section will state a number of conclusions that seem warranted by the study’s findings. First of all, it seems clear that all
of the school social workers in this sample practice in heteronormative environments. They acknowledge the impact of that fact, but also follow their personal and professional ethics in engaging with students on the fringe, including gender-variant youth when encountered. The social workers that were interviewed for this study seem to be advocates for diversity, willing to learn more about gender variance, and positively engaged in making their schools into more accepting environments. These impressions indeed seem to reflect a practice approach that is congruent with the notion of “virtue ethics”. The overall picture, while partly based on hypothetical scenarios, provides somewhat of a contrast with the recently published study by Payne and Smith (2014), which describes feelings of fear among educators reacting to the presence of a transgender elementary school student. In addition, the results of the current study show some divergence from those of previous research on school social workers and their role in transmitting cultural values, including those related to gender roles (Blair, 2002). While qualitative studies are difficult to compare, the present findings portray school social workers as active agents, experiencing less administrative control. At the same time, it also seems evident that, despite the passage of time, the context provided by the dominant culture has not changed quite that much. Thus, all of the social workers in this study acknowledged, in one form or another, that public schools are part of larger communities – and that conservative views within those communities limit the free and open discussion of such sensitive topics as sexuality. Consequently, it appears that heteronormativity (the silencing of alternative sexual identities and the reinforcement of a binary categorization of gender) continues to provide the frame of reference for much of the teaching and socialization in public education. Based on the interviews conducted for
this study, this may be particularly true in suburban schools, as the increased diversity in city schools generally seems to make for somewhat more liberal views on sexuality and gender – at least in relative terms. In sum then, it is indeed a queer image that emerges: One of power, as well as resistance.

Although not complete, the silencing of differences can be considered one of the main findings of this study – hardly a novel finding, but clearly confirmation of existing and documented practices (Blaise, 2005; Davidson, 2006; DePalma and Atkinson, 2010; Epstein, 1997; Puchner and Klein, 2011; Renold, 2004; Renold, 2005; Surtees and Gunn, 2010). Thus, while bullying in the form of homophobic slurs was mentioned in several of the interviews, the reported reluctance to address it in any substantive way seems more revealing than the occurrence of homophobic bullying per se. The discrepancy between the schools’ stated concern with bullying (and the piecemeal and reactive interventions that flow from it) and the continued practice of silencing variance in gender and sexuality (and silencing issues of gender and sexuality overall) is striking.

In addition to generally progressive views on sexual identity, the participants in this study typically expressed acceptance of gender diversity, although there seemed to be gaps in their understanding of it as a phenomenon. While all of the social workers in the sample had had some experience with or knowledge of gender-variant students, gender-variant behavior was often described as an aspect of sexual orientation or was confused with sexual identity. Thus, it appears that the notion of a homosexual male teen is still easier to comprehend than that of a young transgender woman. As noted, this inclination can be viewed as a form of homonormativity, which silences those who challenge the gender binary and limits the engagement of social workers with their gender-variant
clients. Moreover, the linking of gender identity and gender expression to sexuality has
the practical effect of making the discussion of gender issues as toxic in the public school
setting (especially in the lower grades) as issues of sexuality seem to be. To the extent
that this happens, gender variance will remain largely unacknowledged. The distress and
dysfunctional behavior related to that lack of acknowledgement may well continue to be
misidentified and misdiagnosed.

**Recommendations for Practice**

What follows are a number of concrete practice recommendations resulting from
or related to the findings presented here. The primary recommendation concerns the need
to conduct more training on and discussion of gender variance. Given the focus of the
current study on school social work, that recommendation obviously applies to this
subfield within the profession. However, since much of public education is delivered
through a multi-disciplinary team approach, it is recommended that any training also
involves teachers and all support staff interacting with students (including non-
instructional personnel, for example lunchroom staff). Such a broad-based educational
effort needs to include school administrators as well, so that they can play a preventative
rather than a reactive role with respect to issues of gender diversity. Furthermore, it is
strongly recommended that both social work education and teacher preparation programs
begin to include information about gender variance in their curricula and to make it part
of any pre-service diversity training that states might require. Emphasis in all of these
efforts should be placed on the negative impact of homonormativity, both in terms of the
conceptualization of gender variance and with respect to social work practice with
gender-variant students. Additionally, the findings of this study imply a need to transform
the heteronormative nature of our public schools. Thus, school social workers and other school staff could advocate for a number of institutional changes, outlined below.

- The inclusion of sexual and gender diversity in the curriculum early on, the inclusion of related materials in libraries and media centers, and the assignment of related readings that students can share with parents.

To some extent, these developments are already underway. For example, public schools in California now have to include age-appropriate content about gender and sexual minorities into their curriculum, from the elementary level on up (Watanabe, 2011; Lai, 2011). In this respect, publication of Ready, Set, Respect, a “tool kit” for elementary school teachers around the issues of same-sex parenting and gender diversity (GLSEN, 2012), endorsed by the National Association of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), comes at the right moment. Another example can be found in The Netherlands, where all schools, including those with a religious orientation (which are government subsidized and need to follow a national curriculum) are now required to teach about sexual diversity (Uitleg, 2012). In this context, it may be noted that a Dutch study of 27 elementary classrooms showed an absence of bullying specifically directed at the gender-dysphoric students (Wallien, Veenstra, Kreukels, and Cohen-Kettenis, 2010). The historical acceptance of sexual and gender minorities in The Netherlands may well be a factor in this respect. A recent cross-national study also suggests, albeit tentatively, a link between societal
tolerance and positive peer interactions on the one hand, and -- on the other -- a relatively lower prevalence of gender dysphoric youth with teacher-reported internalizing and externalizing problems (Steensma, Zucker, Kreukels, VanderLaan, Wood, Fuentes, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2013).

- **Removing the emphasis on gender as a category.**
  This can be done in small ways (for example, when students are asked to line up) and on a more significant scale (by installing gender-neutral bathrooms, as has been done in New York City and Portland, OR, and is being debated or adjudicated elsewhere).

- **Using anti-bullying legislation to teach, rather than to punish discrete incidents in an educational vacuum.**

- **Making sex education inclusive.**
  Colorado recently passed legislation in support of comprehensive sex education that includes sensitivity toward gay and transgender students (McCraw, 2013), an important development given how much of a marginalizing experience current sex education practices can be (see Harris and Nguyen, 2013; for a discussion of sexuality education and social justice, see Connell and Elliott, 2009).

- **Sponsoring GSA’s (“Diversity Clubs”) at middle schools and encouraging GSA’s to include gender-variant students** (see GLSEN, 2007, for a report on the harassment of LGBT middle school students in particular).

- **Increasing community awareness** (for example, organizing a “club fair” where the diversity club can be featured alongside other school activities).
Limitations and Need for Further Study

The following paragraphs describe some of the limitations of the current study and suggest additional research to address those limitations. Since this section involves reflection on the particular design, methods, and processes that I used, I once more revert to use of a first-person narrative. First of all, in terms of limitations, questions may be raised about the impact of social desirability on the findings of this study. While orientational research based on semi-structured interviews would seem to be relatively vulnerable in this respect, extensive pre-testing of the interview protocol and the use of follow-up questions were deliberate attempts to minimize the social desirability factor. In this context, I would like to briefly mention one specific example that concerned me when I first reviewed the audio recordings. In the interview with Tara, I asked her about her readiness to talk with parents who support the social transition of a young transgender child. My follow-up question was: Would you ever think “how can they allow this?” (p. 123). At first glance, this would seem a somewhat leading, as well as a close-ended question. However, the response provided some additional information – the social worker’s comparison of a child’s dysphoria-induced wish to change gender with the desire to be “a rock star” -- that was only captured because of that particular follow-up question, confirming the position that there are no firm rules about interviewing (or, in the words of Seidman: “Follow your hunches”; Seidman, 2006, p. 91).

A second concern that may be expressed regarding this study concerns the fact that all of the data analysis was done by myself, as the sole researcher. Hence, that process might be criticized as being biased, influenced by my own beliefs and experiences. In response I would argue that 1) I included many verbatim quotes in the
final report in an attempt to let the participants speak for themselves, and 2) I tried to be as transparent as possible in terms of how I arrived at descriptions and interpretations. Clearly, and unapologetically, “orientational research” has a theoretical/ideological foundation. However, since social work is as a value-laden profession, it could be suggested that Queer theory and other critical theories are especially appropriate as conceptual frameworks for research (and practice).

One clear limitation of this study is its use of a purposeful sample of social workers in the Northeastern United States, typically considered a more liberal part of the country. In addition, the sample did not include social workers from more rural areas. Obviously, the findings presented here cannot be generalized to other settings. Therefore, it might be of interest to survey other regions of the country, urban as well rural, to arrive at a more comprehensive picture of school social work practice with gender-variant students across the United States. In addition, cross-national research of gender-variant students in school settings, such as the recently published study by Steensma et al. (2013b), could further elucidate the relationship between cultural values and school functioning. Congruent with its intent, the present study hints at other issues that deserve exploration. In addition to research on the prevalence of gender variance on school social work caseloads, and about the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of social workers in other geographic areas, further study might focus on the different issues that gender variance brings with it at lower versus higher grades. Also, specific research on best practices, such as how to handle transitions in school and how to effectively advocate for institutional change, would be helpful. Furthermore, it would be of interest to study barriers to the acceptance of gender-variant students, such as religious beliefs, and how
they might be overcome.

Finally, one somewhat surprising finding of this study, which was not explored further, concerns the apparent discrepancy between high levels of homophobic language in (urban) school environments that are also relatively accepting of differences in gender and sexual identity. As noted, a tentative explanation may rest in a possible distinction between manifest and hidden forms of heteronormativity. It is also possible that homophobic language in schools is associated more with bullying generally and less with heteronormativity. These issues would seem to be worthy of additional inquiry.

Some Final Thoughts about Theory, Research, and Action

Reviewing the data from this study, the notion of homonormativity deserves special attention. To some, it may seem far-fetched to place the social transition of 15-year old transgender Jane (formerly John) in the context of Stryker’s academic discourse on homonormativity (Stryker, 2004). “Don’t these kids have enough on their plate?” one could argue, and – in reference to the need for allies: “Shouldn’t we be happy there are GSA’s to support them?” Certainly, with respect to the individual students, this would appear to be true. On the other hand, it would be a pity if we didn’t pay attention to the deeper question that transgender youth ask us to confront: How is gender experienced? Hearing that question would also seem to be part of a “virtue ethics” approach to social work practice. Moreover, it brings us back, full circle, to this study’s Queer framework: Gender as relational, flexible, non-binary, embedded in power dynamics. In the words of activist Kate Bornstein:

A particular insidious aspect about gender – our gender system here in the West, and perhaps for the planet as a whole – is that it is an oppressive class system
made all the more dangerous by the belief that it is an entirely natural state of affairs (Bornstein, 1994, p. 105).

Meaningful engagement with gender-variant youth requires an appreciation of how gender variance disrupts social categories. The previously discussed notion of “doing gender”, for example, with its focus on what maintains the existing social order, cannot adequately account for those who live in the “borderlands” (Davidson, 2006), or for the changes brewing there (and which will, eventually, affect the mainstream). By contrast, Queer theory, with its orientation toward an ever-widening horizon of inquiry, seems to have the potential to accommodate alternative identifications, be they in terms of gender or along other (or even multiple) dimensions. The political implications of a queer perspective are profound, primarily due to its open-endedness. For example, with reference to Foucault's notions of power and resistance, which underlie Queer theory, Sullivan (2003) writes:

In other words, for Foucault, unlike liberationists, resistance is inseparable from power rather than being opposed to it. And since resistance is not, and cannot be, external to systems of power/knowledge, then an oppositional politics that attempts to replace supposedly false ideologies with non-normative truths is inherently contradictory. There can be no universally applicable political goals or strategies, only a plurality of heterogeneous and localised practices, the effects of which will never be entirely predictable in advance. (Sullivan, 2003, p. 42).

Queer theory is about the acknowledgement and the appreciation and the power of the non-normative. Use of a theoretical framework that reconceptualizes identity in the
context of power and resistance to power is inherently political, as suggested by Stephen Whittle with respect to the teaching of transgender theory:

…. [it] is itself an activist process as well as an explorative process. The field is expanding exponentially along with the cultural changes that accompany it. It also poses a daunting problem – in order to hear the voices of trans people, as justice demands, one has to acknowledge the limits of sex and gender and move into a new world in which identity can be imagined, performed, and named. (Whittle, S., 2006, p. xv).

Similarly, research based on Queer theory involves a call to action. As such, it is congruent with the historical mission of social work and with emerging social movements. Thus, Queer theory is about gender variance, but it also speaks to the Occupy movement, which is notably different from social movements of the past in terms of identity politics, or lack thereof.

Finally, Queer theory and its call to action is timely with regard to the issue of gender variance and public schools. Attitudes about sexuality and gender are changing, and as public opinion regarding same-sex marriage indicates, young people are leading the way. On the other hand, given existing research, schools can still be challenging and even hostile places for students who don't fit the norm. Bullying based on gender nonconformity, more so than sexual orientation per se, is at the core of homophobic bullying (for example, Kennedy, 2008). “Effeminate boys” in particular continue to be targeted in social environments that are characterized by hegemonic masculinity (see, for instance, Pascoe, 2007). School social workers need to be ready to facilitate the discussion about sexuality and gender, to implement the changes that result from this
discussion, and to help fight the backlash against them. It is hoped that the study reported on here contributes to our understanding of what “ready” really means and what additional educational experiences social workers (and others working in the field of education) might need to be effective advocates.
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APPENDIX A: The participants in their own words.

As noted in the chapter on methodology, participants in this study were asked to describe their identity without reference to preconceived variables. The resulting descriptions typically included references to roles, professional and personal, as well as personality characteristics. Some of the character traits mentioned (such as empathy) have obvious implications for a practice orientation based on virtue ethics (as discussed previously with respect to the study’s theoretical framework). The descriptions also included frequent references to stereotypical gender roles (mother, girlfriend, spouse). Three participants referred to themselves as women (a “strong, supportive, caring woman”, a “traditional woman”, a “professional woman”), one as “female, very female….very feminine….”. This last social worker, clearly aware of the topic of the interview, also mentioned being heterosexual, while another included her lesbian identity in the description. Overall, however, the social workers’ descriptions indicate that feelings or thoughts about gender identity play a less significant part in terms of how they see themselves than do gender roles and personality features.

Here are the fourteen social workers “in their own words” (specific personal information has been deleted):

Sonya (urban, K-8): I am a school social worker…. my job is very important to me. I spent a lot of time and effort practicing my job. I am a daughter…. I am a sister…. I am a girlfriend…. my family is very important to me as well (…) …. I think it's important …. that people find me approachable and trustworthy…. those are two characteristics…. trustworthy and approachable are important …. I’d like to see myself as somebody who can help change things that may not be going so well for someone …. and as somebody who can help people realize their strengths.
Susan (urban, middle school): Well, I recently got married, so I’m a wife now…. I consider myself to be genuine…. I consider myself to be sincere. I’m very nurturing as a person and I think that definitely guided me into the field of social work. I am honest… (…..)…. I think that I’m very hard-working in my relationships. I try to foster my relationships with a lot of love, you know…. a lot of communication. I try to be as open as possible …. it’s hard to describe yourself (laughing)…. I think that I’m always trying to put myself into someone else’s shoes. I think I’m sometimes over-analyzing myself …. “Oh gosh, did I say the right thing, how did this make the person feel”…. maybe to a fault sometimes …. I guess that’s kind of how I would describe myself.

Courtney (suburban, middle school): Well, I am a pretty traditional woman, I think…. and I see myself as a helper, someone who enjoys helping people and gets fulfillment out of being connected to other people…. and also, the longer I pursue my career, I believe very strongly in a sense of community and how either healing a community can be, and supportive a community can be…. or damaging…. and I think it’s so important for children and adults and everyone, really, to feel a sense of connection with people around them…. yeah…. especially those that are dealing with mental illness or emotional hardships.

Connie (urban, K-8): I just got married. I am politically very liberal….(…..)…. I am pretty blunt, straightforward…. call it like it is…. direct.
Tammy (urban, elementary): I think that I'm a pretty responsible person, pretty responsible individual. I take my work very seriously. I am honest, trustworthy…. very caring and nurturing…. I think that's in this field…. that's necessary at the elementary level…. if I say I'm going to do something, I will do it …(….)…. I really like, follow through…. I think that's why that's so important for me, to be a trustworthy person that people can come to and feel comfortable coming to and sharing personal things…. I mean, in this field that's kind of key…. you have to have that, so that people feel comfortable, I think…. that’s also important for children to really understand….

Dawn (urban, elementary): …. I worked all my life with children and love doing that…. and feel that I have the job of a lifetime right now, as I sit here, because I'm working with kids that I feel need it the most…. kids who have the least…. kids who are the least privileged, I think.... and I feel that the relationship is one of the most important things I can give to the kids that are here.... and helping them to build their relationships. So that's my focus here…. not only taking care of basic needs, like programs to help provide food for the kids, and shelter, and clothing when they are in need of that…. but to help kids build relationships that will sustain them through tough times and good times and will allow them to be successful and happy adults.

Tracy (, middle school): I guess I see myself as a strong, supportive, caring woman. I try to be that person at home and at school and in life. I see myself as a
person that people come to…. to ask questions about good advice…. but I'm also very willing to take feedback from others and change practice and style if needed …. to be able to fit the kids’ needs…. because the kids I work with are pretty tough, so you have to be flexible …. (....)… I feel like I have a lot of kids that are struggling with their identity and I just start where they are at and I don't have any bias towards it....

**Cynthia** (urban elementary): …. I am married, with two children…. I love being a school social worker…. I have been a social worker for probably 15 years, doing a variety of different jobs….. but I love working in the school setting…. it’s definitely been my favorite part…. I always worked with teenagers …. I never thought I would like working with the little kids as much as I do…. they are a lot of fun to be around…. 

**April** (urban, split between two schools, pre-k through 8): I have known that I wanted to be a social worker since I was 13…. so that’s a strong part of who I am. What else is important for people to know about me? Well, certainly my sense of humor…. which takes some time, because if people don’t know me they think I’m a little kooky, but that’s okay …. I think I want people to know that I’m professional…. I don’t like to goof around with anything related to kids, or somebody overhearing something ….(....)…. I’m very laid-back and I think I let people know pretty quickly that I’m not very pretentious…. I guess it’s important that people know that I’m always willing to help…. I may not fix the
problem, but I’ll always jump in …. I am always available, that kind of thing. I think my strongest characteristic is compassion…. I have a lot of empathy for other people….

**Stacy** (rural-suburban, elementary): Not necessarily in order of priority…. I think of myself as a professional woman…. who has always been a working mother…. I think of myself as a married woman…. with responsibilities, ongoing family and work responsibilities…. I identify as a professional woman who has a family as well…. I see myself as someone in a position of responsibility…. and of influence, so to speak, with colleagues…. I think I’m looked upon with respect, and I try to fulfill that to the best of my ability…. I feel very valued here, by my principal and my colleagues, no question….

**Tara** (suburban, elementary): Well, I think that…. what’s important to me…. well, for me personally I would say family is first and foremost, and that comes before my job…. and, even though I am in an academic setting, I would say that still my number one job here is the safety and wellbeing of the students…. and if that helps them academically, great…. but that…. but my real focus is to insure that they are safe, that they are comfortable, they are happy, and that we are doing all that we can to have them coming in as a whole being…. and then that is how they will learn…. I’m hoping that answers your question (laughs)…. and that’s how I describe my job to the kids too…. "My job is to make sure that you are safe and comfortable, and that there’s no bullying going on, that everything is
okay with kids, that everything is okay at home…. and I’m going to do everything
I can to make sure that’s the case for you”….

*Monica* (urban, elementary): Mmmm…. that’s interesting…. let me think about that…. I spend so much time thinking about other people…. well, I am a working mom, so I mostly identify with that…. like a working mom of three…. so I work full-time, so this is a very, kind of…. you know…. very busy, very consuming sort of role here…. and then I have three kids, who are busy, and I’m consumed in that…. and I am married, and my husband is very busy with his career…. so I guess I feel very busy (laughs)…. but I do…. I just basically see myself as a mom and a professional…. 

*Brenda* (urban, elementary): Okay…. I guess my self-perception…. and people also perceive me…. as very open and welcoming and friendly…. I think I am generous in terms of my time and energy…. that I have a very high level of time and energy…. I mean, time is always a crunch, but I have a lot of energy…. I try to make myself very available to people, and I feel that I’m connected…. I’ve been in a lot of different schools, and in every school found a niche or a group of people that I felt were similar to myself, in terms of ideas and advocacy for kids…. and then other people who are dissimilar…. so it hasn’t really mattered where I’ve gone, I know that to be a fact…. I think I’m a really strong advocate for kids…. and probably, I would say my area of greatest difficulty might be with adults who aren’t doing that…. so I guess that’s what I feel I bring to the table…. 

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I am passionate about what I do and I really like what I do and I feel very blessed to have that opportunity, because I know a lot of people don’t…. so I guess that’s who I think I am…. 

**Sabrina** (urban, high school): Okay…. so I would describe myself as a middle-aged, mothering type of social worker, here at the high school…. my gender identity is female, very female, very feminine in my interactions with kids…. it comes up a lot, actually…. my kids will talk about: “You’re really a girl”…. which I think is interesting from an adolescent perspective.”What do you mean by that?”….I am in a heterosexual, monogamous relationship…. I’m a professional social worker, and everybody’s mom.
**APPENDIX B**

**SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS BY AGE AND SELF-IDENTIFIED GENDER, COMPARED TO SAME CHARACTERISTICS OF ALL LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE UNITED STATES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>STUDY’S SAMPLE</th>
<th>ALL U.S. LICENSED SOCIAL WORKERS (2004*)</th>
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<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 or &lt;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-34</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>28.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>65 or &gt;</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SELF-IDENTIFIED GENDER</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other:_____</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Center for Health Workforce Studies, School of Public Health, University at Albany, Rensselaer, NY, and NASW Center for Workforce Studies, National Association of Social Workers, Washington, DC (2006; age groups as per workforce report)*
APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT SCRIPT (minus contact information)

(e-mailed to members of selected chapters of the School Social Work Association of America, distributed during an annual conference of one of its state affiliates, and distributed at meetings of “school-community partnerships”; also attached to e-mail solicitations approved by IRB following submission of a proposal modification – see appendix C)
Dear social work colleague,

Have you ever wondered about the gender socialization process of the students in your school? Have you had particular experiences with “masculine girls” and “feminine boys”? Is, from your perspective, gender expression a factor with respect to bullying? Do you have particular views on the role of school social workers in terms of gender issues?

If you answered affirmatively to any of these questions, I would like to talk with you. I am a doctoral student in the School of Social Welfare at the University at Albany. I am looking for participants in a dissertation study regarding “the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of social workers with respect to gender socialization and gender variance in the public school”.

Data collection for this study will take place in the fall of 2012 and the winter of 2012-2013. As a participant in this research, you will be asked to respond to a number of open-ended questions in an individual interview or during a focus group with about 4-5 other school social workers. If you prefer an individual interview (some people prefer not to share their thoughts on certain sensitive topics with others), you can opt out of the focus group. Both the individual and the group interview will last about 60-90 minutes. The interview will take place at a time and a place that is convenient for you.

Of course your participation is voluntary and confidential. You will receive a $20.- gift card as a token of appreciation and to compensate you for the time given to this project.

PLEASE CONSIDER MAKING THIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE EXPLORATION OF AN IMPORTANT ISSUE IN SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK TODAY!

For further information, you can contact me by e-mail (_______________) or phone (000-000-0000).

Thank you!

Dirk de Jong, LMSW
APPENDIX D

E-mail script sent to selected school social workers whose e-mail address was published on their school district’s website:

Re: Gender issues

Attachment: Recruitment flier

Dear_____________________

I am requesting your assistance in completing my dissertation research regarding social work and gender issues among public school students. I need to interview several additional participants and would really appreciate your help. The interview will take about one hour and I am offering a $20.- Barnes & Noble gift card as a token of my appreciation. I can meet at a place and time convenient for you. Please see the attached recruitment flier for more information. Thanks so much!

Dirk de Jong, LMSW (000-000-0000)
APPENDIX E – consent form for individual interview (minus contact information)

CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY
(individual interview)
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WELFARE -- UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY
135 Western Avenue, Albany, NY 12222

TITILE OF RESEARCH PROJECT:
“School social work and gender variance in the classroom”.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:
Dirk de Jong, LMSW; doctoral student School of Social Welfare, University at Albany.
CO-INVESTIGATOR:
Loretta Pyles, Ph.D., associate professor, School of Social Welfare, University at Albany.

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH:
This is a dissertation study regarding the perspectives of social workers on gender socialization and gender variance in public schools. Data from the study, including verbatim portions, will be used in a written dissertation report. They may also be part of other publishable work in the future.

DESCRIPTION OF HUMAN SUBJECT INVOLVEMENT:
The study will consist of individual interviews and a focus group (group interview). This consent form pertains to participation in an individual, in-depth interview of sixty to ninety minutes. It will take place outside of the respondent's regular work hours, at the School of Social Welfare or at a place convenient to the respondent. The interview will be audio-recorded to facilitate analysis by the researcher.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS RESULTING FROM PARTICIPATION:
Some of the questions during the interview will be concerned with issues of sexuality as they pertain to the elementary school setting. We do not anticipate any risk in your participation other than that you may experience some discomfort when asked your personal views on these matters.

MEASURES TO BE TAKEN TO MINIMIZE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:
You may refuse to answer specific questions or you may withdraw from the study all together at any time.

EXPECTED BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS OR TO OTHERS:
Participation in this study is not expected to benefit the respondent directly. This study is expected to contribute to the field of school social work by increasing our understanding of gender socialization and gender variance at the elementary level, and by elucidating the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of social work professionals regarding these issues.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF RECORDS/DATA:
Your identity as a research participant will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear on any of the interview forms and personally identifying information will be deleted. This consent form
will be kept in locked storage by the researcher. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In addition, the Institutional Review Board of the University at Albany and University officials responsible for monitoring this study may inspect the study’s records.

**AUDIO-RECORDING OF THE PARTICIPANT:**
As noted, the interview will be audio-recorded. Upon completion of the study, the audio-recordings will be erased. Please sign below if you are willing to have the interview recorded for audio.

**TOKEN OF APPRECIATION FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDY:**
The participant will be given a $20.- gift certificate as compensation for the time given to this study. The participant is entitled to the premium even if that individual withdraws from the study.

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**
If you have any questions about this study, please contact the principal investigator:
Dirk de Jong, LMSW; (000)000-0000, ddejong1 @

You may also contact the faculty advisor/co-investigator for this project:
Loretta Pyles, Ph.D., associate professor School of Social Welfare; (000)000-0000, lpyles@

You will receive a copy of this consent form in order to have all contact information handy.

**YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT:**
If you have questions concerning your rights as a research participant or if you wish to report any concerns about the study, please contact the University at Albany’s Office of Regulatory Research Compliance at its toll-free phone number 1-866-857-5459 or via email at hsconcerns@albany.edu.

**VOLUNTARY NATURE OF PARTICIPATION:**
Your participation in this project is voluntary. Even after you agree to participate in the research or sign the informed consent document, you may decide to leave the study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you otherwise have been entitled. The researcher will retain and analyze the information you have provided up until the point you left the study, unless you request that your data be excluded from any analysis and/or destroyed.

**CONSENT OF THE PARTICIPANT:**
I have read, or been informed of, the information about this study. I hereby consent to participate in the study.

____________________________________________________________________
(signature of participant, name, date)  (Optional: Address or e-mail address if you want to receive a summary of the study’s findings)

I give permission for the audio-recording of the interview used in this study.

____________________________________________________________________
(signature of participant, name, date)
I have discussed the procedures, risks, and benefits of the proposed study with the participant, as well as the participant's rights, including the choice not to participate. It is my opinion that the participant fully understands the contents of this consent.

__________________________
(signature of principal investigator, name, date)
APPENDIX F

“Gender variance in the classroom”

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

PLEASE NOTE: Probes to be added as needed for follow-up.

General introduction: The topic of this interview is the socialization of elementary students into gender roles and identities, and the phenomenon of gender-variant behavior on the part of some children (i.e. behavior that is different from what people might consider “typical boy/girl behavior”). This is a fairly new area of research and practice, so I want to emphasize that people’s beliefs and theories differ. However, my purpose for asking the questions is to get a picture of your experiences with these issues as a school social worker, as well as your perceptions, values, and attitudes related to them.

1. Instead of asking you specific personal or demographic information, can you please describe how you see yourself as a person, or describe aspects of your identity that are important to you? How about aspects of your identity that are important in your relationships or interactions with other people? Would you add anything to the description of yourself in terms of how you see yourself in the work setting?

2. Please tell me about your career as a school social worker. (Probe for educational/employment history, specific professional interests or activities)

3. How would you describe the school(s) that you are currently working in? (Follow up: Urban/suburban/rural? SES? Racial/ethnic composition? Progressive/conservative?)

4. What can you say about the school community in terms of diversity/openness to differences among people? Can you give some examples?

5. What have you observed at your school about how kids learn what it is to be a boy or girl? What do they learn in this respect from their interactions with other students? What about adult-child interactions?

6. In your school, what do you think it is like to be a kid who doesn't adhere to established gender norms (i.e. a “feminine boy”, a “masculine girl or “tomboy”)?

7. School social workers deal with a range of issues during the school day. What are the issues you deal with in a typical day? Among all the things that you deal with
in a given day, what situations, if any, might occur that involve gender stereotypes? How might it come up in discussions you have with students or school staff, if at all?

8. Gender variance ranges from girls who are called “tomboys” and boys who like to play dress-up, to kids who want to have clothing or haircuts usually associated with the opposite sex, to children and adolescents who insist that they are “transgender”. How do you explain why some children or adolescents engage in gender-variant or cross-gender behavior? Do you have a theory as to what determines a person's gender identity or personal experiences that explain how one’s gender identity develops?

9. How would you respond if a student discloses to you as transgender, i.e. when a girl comes to you and tells you she feels like she is really a boy, or a boy tells you he feels like he is really a girl?

10. What issues, if any, have to be addressed when working with a transgender student? What general information about transgender children would be helpful to have, as a school social worker, to be able to effectively address those issues?

11. Sometimes social workers have to advocate for people whose behavior may contradict the workers’ personal beliefs. To many people, gender variance is a difficult concept to “wrap one's head around”. If your role requires you to advocate for transgender or gender-variant students, how does the framework that you practice from help you be that advocate? Is there a process you have to go through yourself, a personal “readiness” process, to be able to fully engage with this issue? If so, what is involved in that process?

12. What would happen in your school if someone wanted to have a discussion with students, in a small group setting, about gender variance? How about an open discussion with students in a classroom?

13. Gender stereotypes seem to reinforce notions of the normative romantic relationship between a woman and a man. Thus, for some people, gender variance also brings up issues of sexual identity. For instance, they might see the relationship between a transgender girl and a “biological boy” as a homosexual relationship. How do you view the connection between gender variance and issues of sexuality? How do you think this connection (between gender variance and sexuality) affects the open discussion of gender variance in a public elementary school like yours?

14. In general, discussions about gender diversity often lead to conversations about sexual diversity. In terms of sexual diversity, how does a school like yours address issues like same-sex relationships and same-sex parenting? In what context do you, as a school professional, feel comfortable talking with students about these topics?
15. Sometimes students use sex or gender “put-downs” (“so gay, “faggot”, “dyke”). How does your school respond to this behavior? How, if at all, can school social workers help educate students about what the terms gay, lesbian, and transgender really mean?

16. Can you describe any training you may have had regarding gender and sexuality and the issues we just talked about, relative to your school social work practice? In this particular domain, what type of training would you suggest for new school social workers? What suggestions do you have for “systems change” that may help school social workers respond to the phenomenon of gender variance?
APPENDIX G

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FORM

Please provide the basic demographic information requested below. It will not be reported in relation to any specific statements that you have made or in any other manner that would identify you. Only one pronoun will be used in reporting the findings of this study in order to further disguise each participant’s identity. However, if you prefer, you can leave one or both items blank.

My age is:

__ 25 or under
__ between 26 and 34
__ between 35 and 44
__ between 45 and 54
__ between 55 and 64
__ 65 or older

My gender is:

__ female
__ male
__ other:_____________