

Manitoba Superintendent Experiences with 2SLGBTQIA+ Education Policy

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies of

The University of Manitoba

In partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Education

Department of Educational Administration, Foundations & Psychology

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates the development of Manitoba public school division policies relating to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues and examines the factors that shape superintendents' decision-making processes regarding the creation, review, and revision of these policies. Situated within a context of increasing political polarization surrounding gender and sexual diversity in public education, this study explores how sociopolitical pressures, institutional structures, and personal perspectives influence Manitoba public school superintendents' approaches to equity-focused policy development.

Drawing on two theoretical frameworks—a queer democratic framework and a policy momentum framework—this research examines how Manitoba superintendents make sense of existing 2SLGBTQIA+ policies within their divisions, their interactions with policy development processes, and the possibilities and limitations of policy as a tool for advancing equity. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with five participants, who were selected from the pool of superintendents employed across Manitoba's 38 public school divisions in 2025.

Findings demonstrate that superintendent decision-making around 2SLGBTQIA+ education policy is shaped by knowledge gaps regarding queer issues, competing interpretations of rights and responsibilities, school board dynamics, political pressures, and broader social discourse. The study highlights how misinformation and anti-2SLGBTQIA+ political narratives can constrain policy conversations while also identifying opportunities for more responsive and inclusive leadership practices. Implications for practice include expanded professional learning for educational leaders, intentional engagement with queer communities, and the establishment of consultation pathways to support the development and implementation of equity-oriented policies.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Nathalie Piquemal. Your encouragement and guidance throughout this process were invaluable. Graduate work can be daunting, but your unfailing optimism and belief in the value of this project helped me see it through.

Thank you to my committee members, Dr. Robert Mizzi and Dr. Shannon Moore. I am deeply grateful for the time and care you devoted to this work, and for your ongoing support of my development as an emerging scholar.

Thank you to my dad, who instilled in me the value of education, and my mom, who taught me to love words.

Thank you to my partner, Chelsea, for your love, patience, and support throughout this process.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

This study investigates the developments in Manitoba public school division policies relating to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues in recent years. Specifically, this study explores what factors might explain Manitoba superintendents' decision-making in reviewing, revising, creating, and/or leaving unchanged divisional policy documents relating to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues. What choices do they make, or not make, regarding queer policies – policies that recognize, protect, and sustain queer lives, histories, and knowledge – in their divisions? How do they conceptualize their relationships to queer policy – and, by extension, to queer students, staff, and community members? How does the power inherent to the position of superintendent impact the responsibility a superintendent feels towards equity-centric policy development? This project will engage with all these questions, with the dual goals of demystifying the largely unstudied topic of Manitoba superintendents' experiences with 2SLGBTQIA+ policy and supporting future equity-focused policy development.

Background

The day I began writing this thesis, the lead story on CBC News is about Alberta Premier Danielle Smith (Bellefontaine, 2024). She had just announced that her province would enact “Canada’s most restrictive and wide-ranging set of policies governing the rights and aspirations of [transgender, gender-fluid, or questioning youth]” (Markusoff, 2024, para. 1). Following in the footsteps of Saskatchewan and New Brunswick’s announcements (Taylor, 2023), Alberta students under 16 would now need to seek parental consent to change their name or pronouns in school. Going a step further than Saskatchewan and New Brunswick’s changes, Smith’s policy also mandated that schools must notify parents of 16- and 17-year-old students who change their

name or gender pronouns at school. Formerly known as Bill 27, Smith's new legislation also made Alberta the only province in Canada where parents must opt students into lessons about sexual health, gender identity, or sexual orientation. Eighteen months later, in the fall of 2025, Smith's government invoked the notwithstanding clause to shield this bill, along with two others restricting gender-affirming healthcare, from legal challenges.

A few years ago, this legislation would have been inconceivable to many Canadians. But the cultural context has shifted. There are many reasons for the rise in anti-2SLGBTQIA+ rhetoric in Canada, but perhaps the largest is the influence of our southern neighbour. "Canada reaps the benefits of living next to the United States, our closest ally and largest trading partner, but we also suffer the consequences," writes Anita Brooks Kirkland (2023, para. 3). She connects the growing sub-culture of bigotry in the U.S. and Canada's ballooning anti-queer political action, writing that "now in 2023 the sleeping giant of intolerance and censorship that has reached epidemic proportions in the United States is seeping across the border to Canada" (Kirkland, 2023, para. 3).

Attempts to censor educational materials, including challenges to books featuring 2SLGBTQIA+ content and opposition to inclusive curricular resources, have increased in Canada in recent years (Canadian School Libraries, 2023). In Chilliwack, B.C., an unsubstantiated allegation caused the RCMP to launch an investigation into whether or not a school district's libraries contained child pornography (Little, 2023). Speaking to the media on the RCMP's findings, spokesperson for the Chilliwack RCMP Sergeant Krista Vrolyk said, "while the material may be deemed inappropriate or concerning to some people, it does not constitute Child Pornography" (Little, 2023, para. 6). As librarian Mary Jo Goodwin once said, "a good library has something in it to offend everyone" (LaRue, 2018, p. 8).

By uniting individuals against a perceived threat, book banning performs the political work of “[defining] group affiliation through opposition to an imagined Other” (Wells, 2025, p. 25). Book banners, by seeking control over what narratives children can access, are fighting to editorialize both our collective past and children’s imaginations of the future (Wells, 2025). Further, the purging of narratives from school libraries – or, indeed, any libraries – constitutes symbolic violence; libraries are seen as microcosms of the ideal society, and banned books act as placeholders for the elements of society book-banners would prefer removed (Wells, 2025).

Here in Manitoba, the progress made in furthering 2SLGBTQIA+ rights in the province’s public education system in the past few decades is staggering: labour discrimination laws banning the firing of queer teachers; legislation confirming students’ rights to form GSAs in their schools; and 2SLGBTQIA+ content written into curricula are just a few examples (Busby, 2020). However, in recent years Manitoba 2SLGBTQIA+ students, families, curricula, and literature have faced a barrage of right-wing attacks (Moore & Lopuck, 2024). South Central Regional Library, a network of 5 libraries in southern Manitoba, faced a series of coordinated complaints in 2023 about children’s sexual education books in their shelves. When the library refused to remove three books following the complaints, library staff were hit with accusations of being ‘child sexual groomers’ and ‘pedophiles’ by promoting pornography to children (Gowriluk, 2023). A highly coordinated social media campaign and delegations at council meetings across the seven municipalities served by the South-Central Regional Library advocated that the library have its funding withheld until its policies around “what presenters [at a board meeting] described as sexually explicit materials and child pornography” (Gowriluk, 2023, para. 8) be reviewed.

Prairie Rose School Division, Hanover School Division, Mountain View School Division, and Brandon School Division were all targets of attempted book banning during the 2023 school year (Abas, 2023). Online petitions requesting the removal of ‘pornographic materials’ garnered hundreds of signatures before being presented to school boards. Following a presentation requesting the removal of certain books with 2SLGBTQIA+ content and the creation of a book review committee, a Brandon School Board meeting was moved to a high school gymnasium to accommodate the number of attendees present for the debate on the presentation. The vast majority of public attendees were in support of 2SLGBTQIA+ literature in school libraries (Darbyson, 2023). The meeting lasted six hours, and just before 1 a.m. the Brandon School Board rejected the proposal to create book review committees.

The emergence in the early 2020s of the ‘parental rights’ movement has only further polarized discussions around 2SLGBTQIA+ content in schools. The term ‘parental rights’ has no legal basis and is not named in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Constitution Act, 1982)*. Fundamental freedoms (such as freedom of conscience, religion, and expression) and life, liberty, and security of the person are named in the *Charter*, and these rights have been interpreted by courts to include a parent’s right to make decisions about the care, upbringing, and education of their children. However, these rights are not absolute, and must be balanced against the rights and best interests of the child, alongside the government’s duty to protect children. Children are independent rights-holders, and the *Charter* does not grant parents authority to override those rights. As legal scholar Carter (2008) argues, recognizing distinct parental rights under the *Charter* would undermine the status of children as full rights-bearing members of society.

The ‘parental rights’ movement, despite this lack of legal standing, has gained popularity in public rhetoric in recent years (Benchetrit, 2023). “The parental rights movement often presents the LGBTTTQ+ community as a fabricated collective enemy,” writes Shannon Moore, a member of *People for Public Education* (Moore, 2023, para. 6). She explains that the ‘parental rights’ movement has created moral panic “to garner support for increased control over schools” (2023, para. 9) and motivate demands to remove topics relating to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The term ‘parental rights’ was coined in the 1950’s in the United States amidst fears of communism infiltrating the public school system (Macintosh, 2023). Historically, the term has been employed to challenge democratic humanist principles in public education and promote private parental values (Gutmann, 1987; Moore & Lopuck, 2025). In the 1970’s, the term was employed to stoke fear around civil rights gains, including women’s rights, abortion access, and racial integration of schools (Mason & Hamilton). By the early 1990’s, ‘parental rights’ as a term was mobilized as a political lever by evangelical and anti-queer groups opposing public school curriculum on sexual and gender diversity in America (Macintosh, 2023).

Along with book banning attempts, the fall of 2023 saw a rise in anti-queer activism through the *1MillionMarch4Children* marches. These marches were held across the country, including in Manitoba, and produced large gatherings at the Manitoba Legislature on September 20th (Gareau, 2023) and on October 21st at Winnipeg City Hall (Holyk, 2023). Many attendees of these rallies held signs bearing the phrase ‘parental rights’ and shared their beliefs that teaching students about gender identity and sexual orientation is analogous to sexually grooming children (Gareau, 2023). In response to the marches, Manitoba Teachers’ Society then-President Nathan Martindale sent an open letter to then-Premier Heather Stefanson, NDP Party leader Wab Kinew, and Liberal Party leader Dougald Lamont, writing: “these initiatives are physically and

emotionally dangerous for members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and their allies, of which The Manitoba Teachers' Society is one" (Martindale, 2023, para. 2).

As previously mentioned, the 'parental rights' movement is a baseless legal claim, as 'parental rights' are not enshrined in *The Canadian Charter for Rights and Freedoms*. By contrast, student rights around 2SLGBTQIA+ activities in schools are embedded into Manitoba law. In *Safe and Inclusive Schools*, a 2013 amendment to Manitoba's *The Public Schools Act*, it states that each school division in the province must have a *Respect for Human Diversity* policy. In its description of this policy's intent, Bill-18 states that each division's *Respect for Human Diversity* policy must "accommodate student activity that promotes the school environment as being inclusive of all pupils, including student activities and organizations that use the name 'gay-straight alliance'" (Public Schools Act, 2013). A common complaint around the passage of Bill-18, and legislation protecting 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals more generally, is that these laws infringe upon religious freedoms protected by *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. However, simply claiming one's rights have been infringed is insufficient to halt the passage of new laws; as Donn Short comments in his 2014 article supporting Bill-18, "It is only actual, objectively established burdens on *Charter* rights that trigger interference, not professed infringements" (Short, 2014, p. 129). Gathering these professed religious rights infringements under the umbrella of 'violations against parental rights' does not lend them the empirical or legal evidence required to challenge established laws.

At present, there is little research on the effects on Canadian students of recent book bans and/or the 'parental rights' movement in Canadian public schools, though the field is certain to grow in coming years in response to the current onslaught of anti-queer rhetoric and activism against (and within) the institution of public education. In their study of Florida's 2022 *Parental*

Rights in Education Act (commonly known as the ‘Don’t Say Gay Bill’), American researchers Fowler & Mountz (2024) argue that the current insinuation – particularly by right-wing lawmakers – of ‘parental rights’ as under attack across North America is both factually incorrect and an unoriginal but effective technique to galvanize support for anti-queer legislation across public education. By equivocating the act of talking to students about queerness as inherently wrong, immoral, or harmful, ‘parental rights’ rhetoric “reifies assumptions about the inherent subversiveness of dissident genders and sexualities” (Fowler & Mountz, 2024, p. 32); messaging to children that queerness *itself* is inherently wrong, immoral or harmful.

Egale Canada, an advocacy organization for 2SLGBTQIA+ people, launched its first National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia in 2008, with the goal of “providing decision-makers with the methodologically rigorous statistical evidence that they needed to develop and implement 2SLGBTQIA+ specific policy and provincial legislation” (Egale Canada, 2021, p. 10). In 2021 Egale conducted a follow-up survey, which found that students reported hearing less homophobic and transphobic remarks than the first Egale survey conducted in 2008 (Egale Canada, 2021, pp. 49-50). Similarly, Egale’s 2021 survey found that 2SLGBTQIA+ students, while still targeted more often than their non-queer friends, reported decreased levels of harassment on the basis of their identity (2021, pp. 50-52). It is crucial to note that 2SLGBTQIA+ participants in the survey nonetheless “reported higher counts of verbal harassment than [cisgender heterosexual] students across all indicators” (Egale Canada, 2021, p. 63), including sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, racialized identity. Also crucial to note is that Egale’s second survey was completed prior to the onslaught of book banning attempts, ‘parental rights’ rhetoric, and anti-trans provincial education legislation. Echoing Egale’s 2021 findings, a 2023 study examining Canadian students’ wellbeing in relation

to their awareness of school-based GSAs found that “[LGBTQIA+] students scored significantly higher than heterosexual, cisgender students on the victimization subscale of the Illinois Bullying Questionnaire” (Di Stasio et. al., 2023, p. 162). Additionally, Di Stasio et. al. found that 2SLGBTQIA+ students reported less autonomy and relatedness with teachers and family, less fulfillment surrounding autonomy and competence, and less comfort with their sexual orientation at home and school than their cisgender, heterosexual peers (2023, pp. 163-164). Both Egale and Di Stasio et. al.’s research point to a central finding: life is still significantly harder, both at home and school, for 2SLGBTQIA+ students in comparison to their non-queer peers.

Statement of the Problem

About six months before completing my master’s classwork and beginning my thesis, a situation emerged in my professional life that was rooted in trans- and homophobia. The flurry of book bans, marches, and right-wing political rhetoric had emboldened individuals in my school’s community to express bigoted views with fresh candor. I witnessed how in educational settings, transphobic and homophobic words and actions were suddenly palatable and permissible by both those within and outside of public education infrastructure. The questioning of the basic human rights of queer people – rights which have been enshrined in Canada’s laws for years (*Canadian Charter*, 1982), and in provincial human rights legislation – was accepted in my workplace as an ethically defensible position.

Demoralized and confused by these de-developments, I pored over our divisional documents for clear guidance on how to navigate the situation. What I learned was that each Manitoba school division has two types of documents that provide divisional direction: administrative procedures (APs) and policies. An important note: administrative procedures and policies are not synonymous. The Manitoba School Boards Association explains them as

follows: “The primary function of a school board is the determination of policy. These policies are, in effect, the laws under which a division or district operates. Administrative procedures reflect processes and how to implement policy” (Manitoba School Boards Association, 2023, para. 1). My division, like most in Manitoba, posts their APs to their divisional website. Using two of our divisional APs, one titled *Equity* and the other *Respect for Human Diversity*, I was able to make clear both the egregiousness and legal impermissibility of the trans- and homophobic situation which had occurred. The errors were acknowledged, and steps were taken to ensure the situation would not recur. In fact, our division ultimately created a new AP, *Library Materials*, to provide additional support to any future situations of a similar nature.

In the aftermath of this experience, I became a public school division policy enthusiast. I was captivated by the power that my division’s APs had given me when arguing my case to superiors about why the situation in question was rooted in anti-queerness. Before bringing the *Equity* and *Respect for Human Diversity* documents into my discussions with my superiors, I had found myself backed into the all-too-familiar corner in which my grievances were seen as rooted in a personal mission; behold the weaponized ‘gay agenda,’ in which queer people are perceived as active recruiters, obsessed with their own queer identities and “aspiring to ensnare anyone, including children, into our deviant ‘lifestyle’” (Walton, 2014, p. 19). In other words, I was labelled identitarian and promptly dismissed. Maggie Nelson (2015) writes:

I’d say the simple fact that she’s a lesbian is so blinding for some, that whatever words come out of her mouth [...] certain listeners hear only one thing: *lesbian, lesbian, lesbian*[...] when it’s actually the listener who cannot get beyond the identity that he has imputed to the speaker. Calling the speaker identitarian then serves as an efficient excuse not to listen to her, in which case the listener can resume his role as speaker. (p. 54)

Once I found the APs and began including their content in the discussions, the tone of the conversations shifted monumentally. The existence of the equity-centric APs meant I could argue my case using others' words. I could offer the authors of these APs their own language back to them, sliding highlighted sections of paragraphs they themselves had written across board room tables to support my claims of anti-queer rhetoric and behaviours in our division. Almost immediately, the accusations of flouting a personal agenda dried up. The identitarian label lost its power. The APs were not perfect documents, but they were enough to act as a shared set of facts, a target that both sides of the table could agree to aim towards.

Following this experience, I decided to focus my master's research on Manitoba school divisions' queer-centric policies. Both the *Equity* and the *Respect for Human Diversity* APs in my division were most recently updated in 2022. My inexperience, optimism, and lack of professional training on engaging with equity issues led me to assume that other divisions, in the face of the rising anti-queer sentiment, had also made changes to their policies to address the ever-changing climate around 2SLGBTQIA+ issues. I decided I would create a research project that examined superintendents' experiences with updating and/or creating new queer-focused divisional policy.

However, once I began compiling data on Manitoba divisional queer-centric policies, a stark picture emerged. I discovered that many Manitoba school divisions had not created new queer-centric policy in the past five years. About half of Manitoba's 38 school divisions had not even reviewed their equity-centric APs in the past five years, and of those who did, the majority made no changes (see Table 1). I was stunned. *The Education Administration Act* of Manitoba decrees that the Minister of Education can make regulations regarding a school's code of conduct and "respecting any other matter related to furthering positive and safe school environments"

(The Education Administration Act, 2024, p. 11). Additionally, the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS) lists taking responsibility for “creating and ensuring a safe, supportive, inclusive and challenging environments” (MASS Priorities 2023-2024, para. 3) as one of their central priorities. MASS also states that one of the purposes of public education is to empower each child with “acceptance of others and respect for democratic values in a diverse society” (MASS Statement of Belief, 2026, para. 3). Yet, despite these documents and their commitments, my cursory research into divisional Administrative Procedures across the province revealed that many Manitoba school boards had not reviewed or updated their equity-centric policies in the past five years (see Table 1, current as of May 2026).

Table 1: Tracking of *Respect for Human Diversity AP* Adoption/Review/Revision/Amendment

SCHOOL DIVISION	NAME OF ADMINISTRATIVE PROCEDURE	ADOPTION/REVIEW/REVISION/AMENDMENT
Beautiful Plains	Respect for Human Diversity	Approved June 17, 2014; Revised October 7, 2025
Border Land	Respect for Human Diversity: Gender Identity and Expression	Adopted September 2012; Amended October 2017
Brandon	Equity	Adopted March 2010; Amended December 2017
Division scolaire franco-manitobaine	Respect de la diversité humaine (avec glossaire)	Approved June 2014; Revised December 2021
Evergreen	Human and Gender Diversity	Adopted April 2005; Amended September 2006, March 2018, August 2025
Flin Flon	Respect for Human Diversity and Equity Education	Reviewed January 2020, August 2025
Fort La Bosse	Respect for Human Diversity	Reviewed May 2025
Frontier	Human Rights	Adopted September 2009
Garden Valley	Respect for Human Diversity	Adopted June 2014
Hanover	Respect for Human Diversity	Adopted May 2014; Reviewed October 2023
Interlake	Equity	Adopted September 2022
	Respect for Human Diversity	Adopted September 2022
Kelsey	<i>Administrative Procedures not available online</i>	
Lakeshore	Respect for Human Diversity	Adopted August 2014; Reviewed September 2022, March 2025
Lord Selkirk	<i>No Respect for Human Diversity (or equivalent) Administrative Procedure</i>	
Louis Riel	Respect for Human Diversity	Adopted December 2011; Revised April 2019
	Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	Adopted June 2022
Mountain View	Respect for Human Diversity	Adopted August 2014
Mystery Lake	Human Rights	Adopted June 2012; Reviewed February 2019, March 2022, November 2025
Park West	Respect for Human Diversity	No dates provided
Pembina Trails	Respect for Human Diversity	Revised June 2015, March 2025
Pine Creek	Respect for Human Diversity, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity	Revised September 2018
Portage la Prairie	<i>Administrative Procedures not available online</i>	
Prairie Rose	Respect for Inclusion and Human Diversity	Approved August 2017; Amended May 2025
Prairie Spirit	Respect for Human Diversity	Adopted October 2014; Amended June 2019
Red River Valley	Respect for Human Diversity	Adopted March 2015
River East Transcona	Human Rights	Adopted March 2005; Reviewed November 2019
Rolling River	Respect for Human Diversity	Adopted September 2014; Reviewed January 2019
Seine River	Respect for Human Diversity	Adopted April 2024
Seven Oaks	Commitment to Equity	Adopted May 2014; currently under review
Southwest Horizon	Respect for Human Diversity	No date provided
St. James-Assiniboia	Respect for Human Diversity	Adopted September 1976; Revised May 2014
Sunrise	Human Rights	Created April 2018
	Respect for Human Diversity - Gender Identity Guidelines for Students	Adopted April 2018
Swan Valley	Respect for Human Diversity	No date provided
Turtle Mountain	Respect for Human Diversity	No date provided
Turtle River	Respect for Human Diversity	Adopted September 2023
Western	Respect for Human Diversity and Equity Education	Adopted June 2014
Whiteshell	<i>Administrative Procedures not available online</i>	
Winnipeg	<i>Administrative Procedures not available online</i>	

In recent years, Canada has experienced a sustained increase in police-reported hate crimes, including those targeting 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, alongside growing public visibility of anti-2SLGBTQIA+ discourse (Statistics Canada, 2025). In the face of escalating violence against queer communities, how could so many school divisions not re-evaluate their divisional policies which address 2SLGBTQIA+ issues? Or perhaps more bewildering, what would lead school divisions to review queer-focused policies from five, ten, fifteen years ago and *not* find reason to update the language and provide a more robust divisional understanding of equity, diversity, and inclusion? These questions became the foundation upon which I built my

research project. My initial idea was to build a research project that would provide evidence to support the idea that education policymakers have failed queer students and families. The generous interpretation of this initial instinct is that as a member of the queer community I had a right to be angry, and seeking evidence of malice is a logical reaction to experiencing pain that feels deliberately inflicted. The less generous interpretation is that I wanted to prove myself right.

In the early stages of contemplating this thesis project, I was reading political advisor and policy expert Jennifer Pahlka's 2023 book *Recoding America*. In it, she writes, "When systems or organizations don't work the way you think they should, it is generally not because the people in them are stupid or evil. It is because they are operating according to structures and incentives that aren't obvious from the outside" (2023, p. 48). She adds that, when it comes to outcomes of policy, people often assume that a system was designed to operate in a certain manner, when in fact that system wasn't designed at all. Furthermore, Pahlka points out that writing strong, effective policy is difficult. It's often either too broad or too narrow, "either a statement of intentions without clear instructions on how to go about achieving those aims, or a set of overly specific directives that can be fulfilled without achieving the real policy goals" (Pahlka, 2023, p. 19). Pahlka's writing invited me to consider initiating a broader, more meaningful conversation around policy and equity; to reach deeper than manufacturing a superficial consensus of data that upheld my right to be angry. Perhaps the ways that school division policy failed to protect queer students and educators (Taylor et al., 2015; Kirkup et al., 2020; Egale Canada, 2021; Fowler & Mountz, 2024) wasn't deliberate, or at least not entirely so. Maybe the people closest to those policy documents – the superintendents themselves – were also frustrated and bewildered by the relationship between their divisions' policies and the lived experiences of their queer students,

educators, and families. I wondered if perhaps the vicious, ongoing dehumanization of queer people was a source of quiet agony in superintendents' professional lives as much as it was in mine.

Discussion of Terms

At the outset, it is necessary to establish working definitions of several key terms that will be used throughout this thesis. "For me, words are a form of action, capable of influencing change. Their articulation represents a complete, lived experience," writes Ingrid Bengis (1972, p. 38). Words have meaning and power. In the context of this text, arriving at a shared understanding of the meaning of certain words offers me, the writer, and you, the reader, some certainty that we are having the same conversation. The phenomenal human ability to metabolize nuance and imagine each other complexly (Green, 2008) is only available to us when we agree on what the words we speak, at their most basic level, mean. An example: I once had a long, grumpy conversation with my dad about the harmful impact of the male gaze in media. He did not seem to understand what I was saying, and I became increasingly cross over his Boomer-esque ignorance on gender dynamics. Finally, he nervously suggested that it was strange I was so against "the whole male gaze thing," seeing as I am a queer woman. It turns out, the whole conversation he thought we were talking about *the male gays*, and I thought we were talking about the male gaze.

To that end, the first word I would like to discuss is *queer*. Originally conceived as a slur, in recent decades the word *queer* has been reclaimed as an umbrella term for people who identify as members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. It is notable that even as I write that acronym, I am aware its presence in this thesis will age poorly; that it will (and should) look different in a year or two, and again a year or two after that. It is also worth acknowledging "how fraught it

can be to encapsulate the incredibly diverse range of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities in a handful of letters” (Ling, 2020, p. 7), and how any version of the acronym “fails to acknowledge the extensive theoretical developments by queer scholars, who eschew neat and fixed identity categories” (Lugg & Tooms, 2010, p. 77). It is a head-scratching paradox of representation: no matter how many identities you make sure to name, there will always be ones left out. Inclusion of many, even just in the context of an acronym, always means the exclusion of some. “Rule of thumb,” writes Maggie Nelson (2015, p. 69), “when something needs to be erased in order to get somewhere, there’s usually a problem.”

I propose no brilliant solution to the problem of the semi-inclusive acronym. Instead, I am ducking the problem in favour of the acronym’s linguistically elegant counterpart: *queer*. This word first appeared as a synonym for homosexual, used by the Marquess of Queensbury in 1894 (Perlman, 2019). According to *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary of Slang*, *queer* became a common slang word for homosexual by around 1914 in the United States, but the dictionary “notes that it was ‘derogatory from the outside, not from within,’ a hint that it was being embraced as a self-description even then” (Perlman, 2019, para. 4). It is a term “radically inclusive by design” (Lugg & Tooms, 2010, p. 77). That said, the word *queer* is not without its own baggage. As an umbrella term, ‘queer’ has a flattening effect (Cheves, 2023), particularly for individuals who take up the moniker ‘queer’ “as a kind of leftist political stance of ‘identity-less non-definition’” (Cheves, 2023, para. 37). For many, embracing the label *queer* is in fact an attempt to reject labels – to work the trap one is inevitably in (Nelson, 2015) – by accepting *queer* as a term meaning no definition, rather than a term meaning all definitions.

Despite its shortcomings, in my lived experience as a queer person, I know *queer* works for many of us. It feels good; specific enough to identify us as *us* but vague enough to keep us

safe, to keep us unlimited, to allow those of us who desire it the ability to float along the letters of the ever-changing acronym without having to come out again each time. So, for the purposes of this thesis, I will use the word *queer* as a broad label (or, perhaps, a non-label!) to define all people who identify as non-straight and/or non-cisgender, as a means “to capture gender and sexual diversity broadly speaking and to resist normative categories” (Leonardi & Moses, 2021, p. 4). As *queer* is both a verb and a noun, I will at times employ the word *queer* as a verb, where it means “to challenge normalizing mechanisms of power, to disrupt what is considered ‘normal’, and to examine possibilities outside of normative discourses, even those that do not center gender or sexuality” (Leonardi & Moses, 2021, p. 4). A crucial note: as a queer person, I am comfortable using the word, despite its history as a slur. However, I second Lugg and Tooms’s strong caution “that non-queers use the word queer at their own risk” (2010, p. 78). Another note: despite my preference for the word *queer*, I will still be using the acronym 2SLGBTQIA+ throughout this thesis, as it is the term used in most school divisions’ queer-focused policy documents.

The second word I would like to define is *community*. In his book exploring the investigation into the serial murders of queer men (most, racialized) in Toronto’s Gay Village, Justin Ling writes, “There is a very good argument to be made that, even if there are communities of queer people, there is no queer community” (2020, p. 8). He points to the racism, sexism, and transphobia present in many spaces that are often labelled as queer communities. “A community is not a utopia,” he writes, “but it should be a place where outside prejudices are unwelcome, and where solidarity is a default. Unfortunately, that is not yet a reality” (Ling, 2020, p. 8). Without an acknowledgment of the role of intersectionality within group politics, any definition of community is profoundly incomplete. To embrace a more truthful, if less rosy,

definition of *community*, we must “understand the need for, and summon the courage to challenge, groups that are after all, in one sense, ‘home’ to us, in the name of the parts of us that are not made at home” (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 115). The process of challenging an oversimplified *community* definition – which is to say, a community that is defined by the members who hold the most privilege within it – is complex and confronting. However, acknowledging the role of intersectionality when navigating “the ongoing necessity of group politics” (Crenshaw, 1994, p. 111) can in fact strengthen arguments in favour of equity-focused policy reform. Cole and Duncan (2023) write that “an intersectional analysis can make policy interventions both broader in their reach and targeted to changing the causes of inequality rather than remediating their proximal effects” (p. 74). In this thesis, there is no implied utopia to a community built upon group politics, no expectation that the bigotries of the world have somehow not snuck in, that the trans people and the women and the racialized people and the differently abled people will not, as always, hold less power. Intersectionality is not a caveat to the definition of *community*; it is its central thesis, the target at which *community* is permanently aimed but never quite reaches.

Finally, I would like to discuss the word *policy*. Ball (2013) points out that “‘policy’ is one of those obvious terms we all use but differently and often loosely” (p. 8). Ball (1993) offers two interpretations of the word *policy*: policy as discourse, and policy as text. As discourse, policy produces ‘truth’ and ‘knowledge,’ particularly similar policies grouped together (Ball, 1993, p. 14). As text, policy is a representation which is both encoded and decoded in complex ways, and is in a constant state of change (Ball, 1993, p.11). Similarly, Lisa Loutsenheimer (2015) writes that “policies are not a ‘thing’ to be understood” (p. 104), but instead a process in a constant state of reproduction and reworking. Policies are dynamic documents, and the process of creating, un-creating, and re-creating them is on-going, interactional and unstable (Ball,

2013). I will continue my discussion of what policy is and *is not* in Chapter 3. However, to pursue the research questions set forth in this thesis, it is crucial to accept Ball and Loutzenheimer's understanding of policy as a permanently unsettled process.

Research Questions

This study's central research question is: What factors (sociopolitical, institutional, and personal) might explain Manitoba superintendents' decision-making in reviewing, revising, creating, and/or leaving unchanged divisional policy documents relating to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues?

This study's sub-questions are:

1. How do Manitoba superintendents navigate and make sense of their processes of interaction with their divisions' 2SLGBTQIA+ administrative procedures and policy documents, including catalyst events, queer consultation, and policy rollout?
2. How do Manitoba superintendents make sense of and interact with the intent, content, and impact of the current 2SLGBTQIA+ administrative procedures and policies in their divisions?

This study's central research question aims to uncover how superintendents make sense of and interact with their divisions' current policy documents concerning 2SLGBTQIA+ issues. This question aims to understand not just the decisions superintendents make around divisional policy concerning 2SLGBTQIA+ issues, but also to uncover what specific pressures and influences – real, imagined, or both – impact superintendents' decision-making. By learning the sociopolitical, institutional, and personal factors embedded into a superintendent's decision-making process around these administrative procedures, I will create a detailed picture of how Manitoba superintendents understand and interact with 2SLGBTQIA+ policy. This question will be addressed through the interviews.

Sub-question 1 aims to invite superintendents' reflections on their interactions with divisional policy documents concerning 2SLGBTQIA+ issues. Through the sharing of catalyst events, queer consultation, and/or policy rollout in their divisions, superintendents will be invited to reflect on what they consider best practice around equity-based policy decisions, and whether they applied best practice in their interactions with their divisional administrative procedures and policies centered around queerness. This question also aims to understand the context surrounding superintendents' queer policy decisions, and uncover what specific pressures and influences impacted superintendents' decision-making.

While sub-question 1 invites superintendents to examine their processes regarding their divisions' 2SLGBTQIA+ administrative procedures, sub-question 2 invites superintendents to reflect on the documents themselves. What purposes, in a superintendent's view, do policy documents serve? *Who* do the documents serve, or not serve? Do they impact the lives of 2SLGBTQIA+ students, teachers, and families at all, and if so, how? Sub-question 2 aims to uncover superintendents' beliefs and experiences surrounding the degree to which policy can affect and/or sustain equity in the public school system.

Theoretical Framework

This project employs a qualitative research approach, and applies a case study methodology of structured interviews, with a minimum of three and a maximum of five interview subjects. Two theoretical frameworks are applied to interpret the interview data: a queer democratic framework, and a policy momentum framework.

The queer democratic framework (QDF), proposed by Leonardi and Moses (2021), brings together elements of both queer and liberal democratic theories. The QDF acts as a conceptual bridge between the two theories, and is intended to be applied to policy analysis and

implementation. “Issues of identity often are central to normative discussions about equity-oriented education policies – as they should be,” write Leonardi and Moses (2021, p. 2). While both liberal and queer theories take up questions around identity, Leonardi and Moses argue that both theories fail to adequately address the challenges of creating and implementing equity-based policy. Leonardi is a queer theorist, Moses a contemporary liberal democratic theorist. They describe the creation of the QDF as the outcome of “trying to make sense of the significant tensions that emerge from educational imperatives to ‘include’ diverse perspectives within social constructs where ‘identity’ is not a static category, inclusion is not enough, and indeed where these very notions need to be queered” (Leonardi & Moses, 2021, p. 2).

The QDF has three central theses. Firstly, the QDF asserts that identity is ever-evolving and unstable rather than static, that it is inherently intersectional, and that group membership is not complete in its representation of each person; secondly, the QDF asserts principles of liberty and equality must be upheld, in particular through the embedding of queer ideas into liberal concepts of autonomy and recognition which are central to policies focused on liberty and equality; third, the QDF aims to emphasize the relationship between theory, policy, and practice (Leonardi & Moses, 2021, pp. 3-5). Leonardi and Moses use the QDF to examine Senate Bill 48, passed by California legislators in 2011. The bill, also named the FAIR Education Act, aimed to ensure that historically marginalized communities be included in social sciences instruction. Through the application of the QDF, Leonardi and Moses found that while the passage of FAIR was a significant step in a positive direction, it lacked the “line of communication between liberal and queer theories” (2021, p. 17) necessary to create rich or sustained change.

The QDF understands identity as “personal, relational, and political” (Leonardi & Moses, 2021, p. 17), and identity categories as politically necessary but likely to perpetuate inequity if

left uninterrogated in the context of policy discussions. The specific language used in the interview data to define 2SLGBTQIA+ students, staff, and families is examined through applying the QDF's definition of identity to uncover the ways in which conceptions of identity and group membership impact policy discussions in Manitoba school divisions. The QDF emphasizes that students deserve "opportunities worth wanting" (Leonardi & Moses, 2021, p. 10), meaning they are provided "meaningful choices from among good options, rather than empty choices that are limited by[...] unjust circumstances" (Leonardi & Moses, 2021, p. 10) and that they can make these choices without punishment or cost. The QDF's notion of "opportunities worth wanting" is mobilized in the creation of specific interview questions, which invite superintendents to reflect on the choices currently available to the 2SLGBTQIA+ students, staff, and families in their divisions. Interviewees are asked to consider how policy change might offer more and/or better "opportunities worth wanting" to these groups, what specific policy changes might create those opportunities, and to imagine how an increase in the number and quality of "opportunities worth wanting" might impact the lives of 2SLGBTQIA+ people in their division.

The QDF highlights Judith Butler's (2004) notion of a "double path" as a method to queer policy analysis and implementation. The "double path" connects liberal and queer priorities by acknowledging that "fighting for recognition via laws, policies, and language is necessary for survival" (Leonardi & Moses, 2021, p. 15) while also insisting that we continue to interrogate the limiting process of creating categories, as well as the ways in which policy changes can act as a distraction rather than a solution for (or at least a strategy against) the root causes of inequity. The language superintendents use to speak about their queer-focused policies and programming is examined through the lens of this "double path"; I examine any history of

queer activism or community events that may have exerted influence over the superintendents' decision-making. I investigate whether the policies or programs they share offered any strategies or solutions to inequity, or if they served as a diversion to provide the broader community with evidence of compliance, if not of competency, in the pursuit of better treatment for 2SLGBTQIA+ students, staff, and families in Manitoba public school systems. This study is grounded in an understanding of gender and sexualities that aligns with Leonardi & Moses's (2021) understanding of identity as unstable and intersectional, and with Butler's (2004) 'double path' as offering a roadmap for policy change to challenge restrictive norms and expand society's perception of recognizable or livable lives.

Policy momentum is a theoretical framework created by Nicole McMahon following her research into the creation of national human rights policies for transgender people in Canada and Australia (McMahon, 2022; McMahon, 2023). She proposes a policy momentum framework as both a "[contribution] to our understanding of LGBTQ+ policy" (McMahon, 2023, p. 497) and "a framework for explaining the conditions for cross-national policy change more broadly" (McMahon, 2023, p. 497). This framework incorporates the four mechanisms of policy diffusion (coercion, competition, learning, and emulation/mimicry) and the understanding that this diffusion can happen horizontally or vertically (either across structurally equivalent jurisdictions or from upper levels of governance down or lower levels of governance up). The policy momentum framework also incorporates the literature on multilevel governance, which explores "interactions between state and non-state actors (such as non-governmental organizations) occurring at multiple sites or levels" (McMahon, 2023, p. 499). By connecting the literatures on domestic and international policy diffusion with research around multilevel governance (MLG), the policy momentum framework considers "the combined role of multidirectional and multi-

jurisdictional diffusion processes” (McMahon, 2023, p. 497). McMahon, through her research into national human rights policies for transgender people in Canada and Australia, found that “policy momentum occurs when the vertical and horizontal pathways of diffusion are simultaneously occurring at different levels” (McMahon, 2023, p. 498). She found that the likelihood of policy momentum generating change can increase or decrease based on five intervening political mechanisms: public opinion, media attention, government ideology, political and non-political events, and knowledge networks (McMahon, 2023). McMahon notes that while her work focuses on national policy change, the policy momentum framework can also be applied to other levels of government or leadership that may experience simultaneous pressure from jurisdictional groups both below and above them.

As I examine the factors that might explain Manitoba superintendents’ decision-making regarding divisional 2SLGBTQIA+ policy, the application of the policy momentum framework allows me to explore the multilevel and multidirectional diffusion processes at play, and how those processes impacted the policy outcomes of different school divisions. Specifically, I apply two central elements of the policy momentum framework to my research. The first is the framework’s four mechanisms of policy diffusion: coercion; competition; learning; and emulation/mimicry. During the interview stage of research, I craft questions which guide superintendents to explain if/how these four mechanisms came into play during 2SLGBTQIA+ policy discussions in their divisions. Once interviews are complete, I examine if there are similarities amongst my interviewees responses, and if that in turn points to certain mechanisms of policy diffusion as more present or effective in Manitoba school division policy discussions than others.

The second central element of the policy momentum framework I apply to my research is the study of intervening mechanisms. The policy momentum framework identifies five intervening mechanisms which can increase or decrease the likelihood of policy momentum generating change: public opinion; media attention; government ideology; political and non-political events; and knowledge networks (McMahon, 2023). To investigate these intervening mechanisms, I include interview questions that invite superintendents to describe their experiences with these mechanisms. I compare responses across interviews to gather a detailed picture of the impact of intervening mechanisms and the likelihood of policy momentum generating change Manitoba public school 2SLGBTQIA+ policies.

Researcher Positionality

This study examines the motivations and decision-making of Manitoba superintendents using case study research. It is interpretive in nature, and instrumentalizes the conceptual frameworks of policy momentum theory and queer theory. To support readers in understanding the viewpoint and lived experience underpinning this study – as well as the motivation and decision-making that led to the undertaking of this study – it is imperative for me, as the researcher, to share my positionality.

I am a white settler and a queer, cisgender woman. I was born and raised in Thompson, Manitoba, in a conservative Christian household. Upon the completion of a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Calgary and a Bachelor of Education with an International Baccalaureate specialization from the University of British Columbia, I returned to Manitoba in fall 2020 to begin my teaching career. I work as a Grade 6 French Immersion classroom teacher in the Interlake School Division at École Stonewall Centennial School, a Grade 5-8 middle school located in Stonewall, Manitoba. A town of approximately 5,000 people, Stonewall is located 20 kilometers north of Winnipeg. Like many rural Manitoba towns, Stonewall is socially conservative, Christian, and overwhelmingly white. More of my

students attend church on Sunday mornings than do not, with many attending New Life, Stonewall's largest church, which is explicitly anti-queer in its mission and values statement (New Life Church Stonewall, n.d.). It is not unusual for students to arrive in my classroom in September not knowing what 'queer' means, what any of the letters of '2SLGBTQIA+' stand for, or having ever met an openly queer adult. The recent emergence and political elevation of the 'parental rights' movement has also deeply impacted Stonewall, galvanizing many parents and community members in our school division to take aggressive stances against 2SLGBTQIA+ books, lessons, and student groups.

I am active in my teachers' union at both the local and provincial level. At the time of initially writing this chapter, I held the role of Equity and Social Justice (ESJ) Chair in our divisional teachers' association (I now hold the role of Education Finance Chair). This role was both inspired by and has further driven my interest in the questions this study takes up; questions examining the intersections of power, leadership, and decision-making in the context of public education's 2SLGBTQIA+ policies. I was voted into the role of ESJ Chair in April of 2023, when pronoun legislation and book banning were still largely U.S.-based education challenges. By the time I had my first official meeting as chair in September, though, the anti-queer vitriol was at deafening levels here in Canada. In truth, if I'd known what was ahead, I might not have put my name forward for the position the previous spring.

Like many teachers' associations and school boards across the country, our local and provincial unions have struggled to navigate the swiftly changing public rhetoric around 2SLGBTQIA+ issues in public education. I have learned there are many voices around tables of power, and yet the experiences those voices speak to are often homogenous. I have spent much time reflecting on the power structures inherent to public institutions in a democratic society, and the role that the public perception of qualitative data plays in persuading a society, particularly

on matters of equity (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003, pp. 79-83). On my commutes to and from the University of Manitoba campus, a 45-minute drive along Winnipeg's perimeter highway, I often brainstorm out loud, trying to piece together an understanding of the process through which policy decisions in my school division (and others) were made.

As I began this thesis process in the early months of 2024 (and still now, as I complete it in the summer of 2026) I feel an echo-chamber effect between my professional, academic, and personal lives, like three mirrors facing each other. It is both a fascinating and uncomfortable feeling. They are inextricably linked, these three pillars of my human experience – less a Venn diagram and more a braid; my life as a queer woman shapes my experiences as a teacher, which drive my academic curiosities, which inform my experiences as a teacher and queer woman, and so on.

Significance of the Study

At present, there is no research exploring the process through which Manitoba school divisions create and/or make changes to their policy relating to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues. In my study of the literature, I found only sparse research on Canadian superintendents' experiences in creating and implementing policy (Amadori et al., 2023; Loveless et al., 2023; Oberg, 2023; Pickering, 2023; Wood et al., 2021) and none examining queer policy creation and rollout specifically. One significant potential contribution of this study, therefore, is to offer valuable insight into the under-researched topic of how Manitoba superintendents make sense of creating, reviewing, revising, and implementing divisional 2SLGBTQIA+ policy, and how successful they view their current divisional policies to be in creating an equitable environment for students, staff, and families. A further potential contribution of this study is contributing to the creation of a framework for the development of future divisional 2SLGBTQIA+ policy. This framework

could include navigational strategies and best practices for approaches to review, revision, consultation, creation, and implementation.

This study, through its semi-structured interview design, offers superintendents an opportunity to reflect on their decision-making choices around their queer-focused divisional policy. The impact of this process of reflection, while non-measurable in the context of this study, is nonetheless a contribution of this research project. Following their participation in this study, superintendents may adopt new, more robust decision-making processes for navigating equity-centric divisional policy. If participation in this study does catalyse superintendents to search for better processes and outcomes surrounding queer-focused policy, the potential framework mentioned above would offer a starting place for divisions looking to improve their equity-based policy development practices.

“The ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make, and could just as easily make differently,” writes David Graeber (2015, p. 54). Before we can make something differently, we must understand how it’s already been made. This research project contributes to the under-researched field of equity-focused policy creation and implementation in Canadian public school divisions. The primary audiences for this research are superintendents, fellow education policy scholars, and provincial ministries of education. For these groups, the data gathered in this project can be instrumentalized to improve personal professional practice, guide future research projects, and inform future policy creation and rollout, respectively. By adding to our collective understanding of equity-focused education policy, this project explores Graeber’s suggestion of deconstruction and reconstruction in context of queer policy in Manitoba school divisions by exploring what has already been created, and how we can create it differently moving forward. Dr. Maya Angelou says, “Do the best you can until you know better. Then

when you know better, do better” (OWN, 2012, minute 2:30). It’s my ardent hope that this research project contributes to Canadian public education’s capacity to do better for 2SLGBTQIA+ students, staff, and communities.

Summary

In this chapter, I introduced my thesis and provided background and context to the topic I will be studying. Next, I shared this project’s research questions, theoretical frameworks, and my positionality as the researcher. Finally, I shared the significance of the study. In Chapter 2, I will present the literature review for this thesis, and share key themes that emerged from the literature. In Chapter 3, I will present the methodology for this research, including the methodological framework and the study design and potential limitations. Chapter 4 will detail the research findings, organized into major themes. Chapter 5 will provide analysis of the data. In Chapter 6, I will offer a summary of key findings, recommendations/implications for practice, and directions for future study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter begins with a review of current literature around superintendent positionality, and queer-identifying superintendents. Next is an exploration of research around discreet activism in leadership roles in public education, approaches to transformative educational leadership, and barriers to superintendent equity work. The chapter concludes with an examination of current literature on superintendent policy decision-making, followed by a brief chapter summary.

Superintendent Positionality

In my review of the literature, I found no research on the positionality of public school superintendents in Canada within the last decade, minimal research from before then (Wallin & Crippen, 2007; Wallin & Crippen, 2008), and only one Canadian article examining queer superintendent positionality (Rottmann, 2006). Widening my research scope to outside of Canada, I found that the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) has published a study of the American school superintendent every decade since 1923 (Mountford & Richardson, 2021). In their most recently published study, *The American Superintendent Decennial Study 2020* (Tienken & Domenech, 2020), the AASA responded to the changing societal context of public education by focusing on equity, including the positionality of American superintendents. The study found that “superintendents continue to be *overwhelmingly* male and White” (Mountford & Richardson, 2021, p. 12), and made clear that “a superintendent’s profile might influence their ability to promote systemic equitable practices in their districts and communities” (Mountford & Richardson, 2021, p. 11). Just over a quarter of superintendents identified as female, and “of the 1,206 superintendents who responded to the

survey item about race, 91.38% reported being White” (Mountford & Richardson, 2021, p. 12). Overall, *The American Superintendent Decennial Study 2020* data found that “in 2020, a superintendent was most likely to be male and White” (Mountford & Richardson, 2021, p. 13).

Researcher Zabrina Epps notes that, “although superintendents cannot achieve systemic change individually, they possess a unique vantage point, access to data, and relationships to effectuate change” (2022, p. 97). Yet, “if there is any chance of developing equitable systems of public education, education leaders must rethink the nature of schools and schooling” (Epps, 2022, p. 97). It’s worth asking, then; can a group of mostly male, mostly White men, do this rethinking? “Privilege saturates,” writes Maggie Nelson, “privilege structures” (2015, p. 97). How can a group of White men address the “gaping hole of neglect” (Mountford & Richardson, 2021, p. 18) the public school system perpetuates in the form of systemic inequality from their deeply privileged standpoint? “Leaders need to understand how the critical issues they face are scripted by worldviews, myths, and metaphors reinforced by the dominant culture,” writes Epps (2022, p. 105). Similarly, in their research into superintendents’ processes of framing equitable change, Coviello & DeMatthews (2021) note that superintendents “bring personal and professional experiences that inform their priorities” (p. 584). Put another way: “Like any cultural value, what is honored and valued by the administration tends to be honored and valued by the school or school system” (Lugg & Tooms, 2010, p. 85). In yet other terms: “It is the superintendent’s reported continual re-evaluation of existing district instructional norms and customs[...] that successfully reorient the organization and focus the district toward increasing student achievement and equity” (Whitt et al., 2015, p. 103). If most superintendents hold the lived experience of *being* the dominant culture – of White supremacy, of patriarchy – can they be

the ones to remove that dominant culture's chokehold on public schooling, its infiltration into everything from teacher education to curriculum? And even if they can, *should* they?

"The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," warns the well-known Audre Lorde essay title (Amindoni, 2023, para. 1). She spoke those words at a panel entitled "The Personal and The Political" in 1979, where she was the only Black feminist and the only lesbian invited to speak (Amindoni, 2023), which included reading her essay aloud. In the essay, she points out the "particular academic arrogance to assume any discussion of feminist theory without examining our many differences, and without significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians" (Lorde, 1984, p. 110). While she was pointing out the bigotry inherent in the idea that "marginalized are equipped to talk about only their marginalization" (Amindoni, 2023, para. 17), of particular relevance to the discussion of White, male superintendents is Lorde's subsequent question through her essay to the panel audience: "What does it mean when the tools of a racist patriarchy are used to examine the fruits of that same patriarchy? It means that only the most narrow parameters of change are possible and allowable" (Lorde, 1984, p. 110).

Queer-Identifying Superintendents

In my search of the literature, I could find no research in the past decade on queer-identifying superintendents in Canada. This information gap is, itself, informative. It guides us into deeper questions. Are there no queer-identifying superintendents in Canada? Or, perhaps there are, but they don't come out professionally – why? What specifically does the lack of research on the topic indicate? Indifference, erasure, silencing? These are questions for another research project; "there is something profound here, which I will but draw a circle around for you to ponder" (Nelson, 2015, p. 112).

Clicking through the gaping void of research on queer superintendents, I was able to locate one 2023 article examining the experiences of queer superintendents in educational leadership. Lauk (2023) acknowledges the gap in research on queerness in upper educational leadership, noting that his article “explores the intersection of sexual identity and leadership in the relatively unstudied level of executive school leadership” (2023, p 97). A 2010 study by Lugg & Tooms, the only other article I could find that mentions queer educational leaders from the past fifteen years – though, like Lauk’s work, focuses on the U.S. school system – similarly acknowledges that “research dedicated to [queer-identifying leaders] within the area of school administration is almost nonexistent” (Lugg & Tooms, 2010, p. 81).

In his qualitative study, Lauk interviewed six superintendents, from the Midwest and Western United States, who identify as gay. Some of the interview subjects were open about their sexuality at work, while others went to great lengths to conceal their identities from their colleagues and the communities in which they worked. As Lauk (2023) notes, a superintendency requires “a delicate balance of diplomacy, political savvy, financial wizardry, [and] expert knowledge” (p. 97), and disclosing one’s identity can trigger a range of reactions, from acceptance to tolerance to bigotry. Lugg and Tooms (2010) note that “because school leaders in the U.S. have been professionally socialized to be both sexist and heterosexist, the sexual identity of the social majority is conflated as a job requirement” (p. 80) of the superintendency. Not only must candidates for the job be willing to hide their queer identities, but they must be “*demonstrably non-queer*” (Lugg & Tooms, 2010, p. 80). One closeted superintendent interviewed expressed frustration at how much energy he had to expend hiding his sexual orientation, while simultaneously working hard to find success for his school division and students (Lauk, 2023). He described having to “de-gay” he and his same-sex partner’s house and

have his partner leave their house when he hosted work parties (Lauk, 2023). Another superintendent shared about the social stresses of being queer in a heteronormative work environment: “I was always guarded[...] I was afraid to get close to people[...] then I’ll have to disclose that part of my life and you may reject me, so I’m going to protect myself” (Lauk, 2023, p. 101). Several superintendents echoed the sentiment that hiding their sexual orientation came at great cost. They discussed the personal and professional stress caused by remaining closeted at work, expressing the psychological trauma of operating under the heteroprofessional (Mizzi, 2013) panopticon of life as a closeted public school superintendent. As noted in *Michael Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, “Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover who we are, but to refuse who we are” (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982, p. 218).

These personal narratives of fear are echoed deLeon and Brunner’s (2009) American study which examined the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ public school administrators. Fear, deLeon and Brunner found, was such an overarching theme that their analysis was divided into two sections: “Fear: Early Experiences” and “Fear: Later Manifestations” (deLeon & Brunner, 2009, pp. 163-173). Their interviewees detailed their experiences in childhood as queer people, and explained how those experiences connected to their current experiences as 2SLGBTQIA+ educational leaders. While most interviewees spoke of the hostility, stigma, and loneliness of queer childhood, many also mentioned that these experiences made them more resilient and determined leaders, though many of the aggressions and hostilities continued in their current professional lives (deLeon & Brunner, 2009, p. 174). Interviewees shared that the mere existence of anti-discrimination laws or policies was insufficient to protect 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, as they found those documents did not engage with “the small, unsaid, day to day oppression that we face, everyday, when we come to work” (deLeon & Brunner, 2009, p. 174).

By contrast, some superintendents Lauk (2023) interviewed found their positionality as queer-identifying people to be beneficial. One interviewee shared about his work as an interim superintendent post-retirement, saying “It’s really helped my career. I’ve gotten to have these interim jobs because I was gay and [the boards] knew it ahead of time and they picked me for diversity support in their schools” (Lauk, 2023, p. 101). Another subject believed that the bullying he endured as a child for being different made him a better leader, and more capable of advocating for his students with clarity and compassion (Lauk, 2023). One superintendent, who never came out professionally, believed his queerness nonetheless helped him stand out, saying: “I would not have had the same level of sensitivity if I hadn’t had the experiences that I had and the fears I had about being more truthful or authentic” (Lauk, 2023, p. 99). Intersectionality remains present in the context of queerness and educational leadership, as those whose identities are “the right kind of queer” (Tooms, 2007, p. 601) benefit most from their queerness permeating their professional lives; namely, White, non-effeminate, able-bodied cisgender men.

Many interviewees struggled with how to navigate the public-facing elements of their role with their queer identity. Fitting into the role of superintendent is not just about following the rules and expectations of a school division, but also involves “*reproducing* [those] norms” (Lugg & Tooms, 2010, p. 80). The very existence of an openly queer superintendent defies the reproduction of norms; an unfair but unmovable reality of the choice to live openly as a queer person. Another unfair but immovable reality of being openly queer: you are not in control of how, or how much, your queer identity matters to others. Several of the superintendents interviewed expressed disdain at the label of “gay superintendent”, sharing their desire to instead be judged only for their performance and achievements as leaders. One subject shared that the term gay superintendent “made his skin crawl” (Lauk, 2023, p. 100). Another expressed anger

that straight superintendents don't have to come out as straight, but as an openly queer person he was expected to make some kind of proclamation to the school board and community about his identity. He said, "I always kind of resented the idea that I would have to have a big sort of reveal or this big Jesus talk or anything like that" (Lauk, 2023, p. 102).

Mizzi (2013; 2024) points out that sexuality and professionalism are interconnected concepts, and that often the more closely one adheres to cis-hetero norms around presentation and behaviour, the more likely they are to be perceived as professional. Mizzi (2024) writes that in modern educational systems, a 'good' leader is still considered "white, heterosexual, cisgender, male, and able" (p. 43). Rottmann (2006) further illustrates the linking of sexuality and professionalism, writing that if a queer school leader triggers an emotional reaction in people that a married heterosexual leader does not, then it is clear evidence "that sexuality is a strong, emotional organizing factor in educational administration" (p. 15). Rottmann (2007) also questions uniform conceptions of leadership more generally, pointing out that "by assuming coherence or consensus in a socially, politically, and economically diverse society, these conceptions of leadership necessarily privilege some and marginalize others" (p. 66). Unlike cisgender and heterosexual workers, who are seen as the norm, as neutral, and as aligning with ideal professionalism – which is to say, heteroprofessionalism (Mizzi, 2013) – queer bodies and identities in professional spaces disrupt the narrative of what a professional is supposed to look and act like. As described in the cases above, many queer professionals fear the personal and professional repercussions of this disruption and decide instead to conceal their queer identities. This concealment invisibilizes queerness in educational leadership spaces, in turn further perpetuating the notion that professionalism and queerness are mutually exclusive concepts.

Discreet Activism & Savviness

In her study examining superintendents as agents of equitable change, Zabrina Epps writes that five of her seven interviewees “explained that although they did not enter the education field to lead a district, once they obtained leadership positions at the school level, they realized how limited they were in their ability to address challenges which were at the system level” (2022, p. 99). Ultimately, these five education professionals had come to the conclusion, through their work in various levels of the public school system, that “the only way to create equity through the school system was to lead it” (Epps, 2022, p. 99). Superintendents cannot, of course, single-handedly achieve systemic change; this is not the nature of leadership in any sector, but perhaps particularly in public education. Additionally, changing the system from within is an enormous challenge, and comes with the potential of *perpetuating* harm instead of *interrupting* it.

Public schools, despite their public image as “a vehicle to improve the social and economic circumstances of students” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 582), often “replicate, maintain and reinforce the very social and economic conditions of the students they seek to address” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 582). Similarly, Mountford and Richardson (2021) note that district policies and infrastructure often have bias and inequitable practices “baked in” (p. 17). A superintendent must therefore reckon with the reality that, even if their ultimate goal is to “disrupt the traditional policies and procedures” (Epps, 2022, p. 100) that maintain inequities, they are nonetheless in charge of structurally biased, harm-perpetuating systems.

In my study of the literature on superintendents’ equity work, *discreet activism* – sometimes referred to as *savviness* – emerged as a recurring theme. Discreet activism “acknowledges certain decisions in a complex and dilemma-laden context may require trade-

offs” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 585), in an attempt to “[avoid] being perceived as antagonistic” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 584). A superintendency “includes both managerial and political components and [requires] a systemic perspective, organizational abilities, and the ability to work with multiple entities” (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2019, p. 464). Superintendents across the literature repeatedly expressed a sense of professional vulnerability, “given that schools and districts are political arenas where power influences allocative decisions” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 584).

Researchers found that, “given their organizational proximity to elected school boards, [superintendents] felt the need to engage in a process of strategically framing equitable change and attenuating their personal sense of equity by being deliberate about how they communicated equity-related policy or practices” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 590). This balancing act of committing to activist work while protecting one’s professional security proves a heavy burden for many superintendents. They describe this balance as a sensemaking process, “a calculation of how to vocally advocate for change while also remaining in position to see that change through to fruition” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 589).

Discreet activism as a process of strategic framing often involves tempering one’s own personal beliefs in order to align oneself publicly with a more palatable – and therefore achievable – view of equitable change. Superintendents are acutely aware that “they [have] to foster trust and buy-in” (Epps, 2022, p. 102) when they initiate new policies. Many superintendents explained how they will take into consideration “their district-community context and perception of support for [equity] issues” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 591) when crafting a framing strategy they believed could be broadly palatable and “result in durable change” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 591). However, it’s crucial to note that many

educational stakeholders, including school board trustees, hold resistance to equity. This resistance goes unspoken until a policy is proposed that challenges their beliefs/understandings of fairness. Many superintendents who employ a discreet activism approach share that they “often spend considerable time trying to identify sources of opposition and resistance – either anticipated or active – and [make] strategic decisions about how to frame their proposed changes in order to attempt to mitigate them” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 591).

While discreet activism is identified by superintendents as a common and sometimes effective method of spearheading equitable change, the counterargument remains that replacing clear messaging about one’s beliefs with a savvier, softer, and more politically astute approach contributes to the reproduction of inequity (Whitt et al., 2015). Moral, recentering, and economic frames can help to de-emphasize the equity focus of a proposed divisional change (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020; Epps, 2022; Lugg & Tooms, 2010), and therefore raise its chances of actually being implemented. But the trade-offs – the de-emphasis of equity as a divisional priority; the psychological stress on superintendents to wrangle their stances on equity into a palatable offering to the public; the confusion among educational stakeholders about what values the public education system actually espouses – are steep.

Some superintendents themselves acknowledge “that being savvy might yield tangible and more immediate results” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 592), but “that avoiding larger conversations around important issues related to equity was a poor choice to make, given their greater long-term significance” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 592). One superintendent shared the frustration of having to self-censor in order to make change: “Dr. Powell resented the fact that being savvy was a necessary part of leading for equity. In her eyes, the moral argument should be enough” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 592). Another, a person of colour, shared

that “he was hired as what he called ‘a bridge-builder’ more than a disrupter and was not expected to be vocal about equity issues in public” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 592). This led several stakeholder groups to criticize his work, as they felt he wasn’t being vocal enough about equitable endeavours, despite the fact that he was working hard behind the scenes to enact change. He ended up in the unenviable position of being “both accomplice and victim” (Nelson, 2015, p. 67), seen as failing to adequately “build bridges” by the school board who hired him and failing to implement meaningful change by equity-focused stakeholder groups.

Coviello and DeMatthews (2020) conclude that “superintendents, board members and other stakeholders should consider lessening unrealistic expectations and reject the narrative that a heroic leader can come in and swiftly turn around a district” (p. 594). While few would argue that a superintendent can – or should – approach their work through a lens of heroism, there is a counterargument that to be an ethical leader is to be willing to suffer to improve the lives of others. Is that not, in many ways, exactly what advocates and activists call upon educational leaders to do? Especially those who hold dominant identity markers – which, as is outlined earlier in this chapter, most superintendents do? Further, it’s worth considering that the imagined danger of speaking up for equity initiatives may be, indeed, just that: imagined. Coviello and DeMatthews remind us that “it is difficult to ascertain the actual, rather than perceived, danger in speaking out loudly and aggressively regarding equity” (2020, p. 593).

“Being an ally is difficult and often requires sacrifice, which makes maintaining motivation equally difficult,” write Broido and Reason (2005, p. 87). Allyship *should* be uncomfortable. Allies (sometimes also labelled as *accomplices*; an effort to linguistically reinforce the non-passivity inherent to the role) must be willing to publicly align with members of oppressed groups, with an understanding that they are simultaneously raising the risk of

repercussions and being protected by their privilege in a way those they are aligning with are not. They may not feel ready to do the work, may not feel that conditions are ideal to enact change, but must recognize that change is nonetheless far past due (DePalma, 2009). This public insistence upon justice demonstrates an ally's "willingness to take risks beyond personal interest and their willingness to leverage their privilege and associated social capital towards justice" (Bourke, 2020, p. 190). "Allyship has been diluted conceptually," argues Kelsey Smoot (2020), reduced to "the metaphorical equivalent of the older kid in the schoolyard" (para. 4) who sticks up for a younger child. They propose a more robust, honest definition, writing: "the truth is, genuine allyship is not kindness, it is not a charitable act, nor is it even a personal commitment to hold anti-racist ideals – it is a fall from grace" (2020, para. 6). It must involve deep, sustained risk and sacrifice, and the reduction of financial, interpersonal, and bodily safety. It must be a "palpable, incalculable loss" (Smoot, 2020, para. 6).

How, then, do we reconcile this definition of allyship with the evidence in the literature that superintendents regularly employ discreet activism (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020; Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2019)? Should we support educational leaders embodying the identity of the *tempered radical*, who "is committed to a cause but operates within restrictions their organizations place on them" (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 585)? As a researcher stepping into this conversation, I am harassed by a burning question: despite its popularity among superintendents, can discreet activism truly be considered an ethical leadership choice in public education?

In their conclusion, Coviello and DeMatthews (2020) acknowledge that despite the entrenched, systemic nature of inequity, leaders should nonetheless consider abandoning the "walking-on-eggshells" approach of discreet activism. Instead, they suggest "leaders should give

serious consideration to embracing, rather than avoiding, contentious public conversations around equity” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 594). They further acknowledge that, while savviness and issue framing is an important element of leadership, the superintendency’s requirement for political acumen does not abdicate superintendents from the responsibility of engaging with equity issues.

Approaches to Transformative Educational Leadership

In their investigation into transformative leadership approaches, Shields & Hesbol (2020) examined the practices of three school leaders in a large urban school district in the United States. All three school leaders shared a pedagogical focus on increasing equity in their schools, though each leader employed different approaches. The first leader utilised visuals, installing posters and murals throughout their school building that provoked courageous conversations about power and privilege; the second implemented professional development for all staff in their school about trauma-informed behaviour management; the third leader prioritized building a more engaged student body by building a culture of respectful communication between students and classroom teachers. The most clearly demonstrated finding in Shields and Hesbol’s (2020) study was that “despite a stated mission to ‘meet the needs of all students,’ until mindsets change, and both implicit bias and deficit assumptions are overcome, then equity, inclusion, and social justice will remain illusory” (p. 18) in public education despite the best efforts of individual school leaders’ efforts.

Throughout my study of the literature on approaches to educational leadership, a focus on leadership disposition emerged (Leithwood, 2021; Pryor, 2020; Shields & Hesbol, 2020). In their study of equitable school leadership, Leithwood (2021) notes that “many decisions faced by leaders are ethical dilemmas and almost all decisions are influenced, one way or another, by

leaders' values" (p. 4). Similarly, Shields and Hesbol (2020) describe a "growing body of literature that describes the need for school leaders to be dispositionally prepared to address the evolving, culturally distinct needs of students and their families" (p. 19). In the complex and unpredictable landscape of modern educational leadership, there is no fixed set of guidelines or practices that will address all potential challenges, particularly those related to equity. Instead Leithwood (2021) argues that educational research ought to examine the specific dispositional characteristics associated with equitable leaders in order to improve equity outcomes in the public school system. Further, Leithwood (2021) suggests that since the current research already points to a clear link between dispositions and decision-making in leadership roles, "privileging dispositions among hiring criteria seems warranted" (p. 34) when school divisions are recruiting and selecting leaders.

Barriers to Superintendent Equity Work

Despite the power and influence that comes from a superintendent's position, "one of the potential challenges specific to superintendents' leadership for equity may be related to their high-profile position" (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 583). As noted earlier in this chapter, those challenges are amplified when the superintendent holds one or more minority identity markers. While superintendents of minority identities can "demonstrate how being truthful and authentic about their identity can be instrumental to their inspired leadership" (Lauk, 2023, p. 102), they are also vulnerable to suffering "great personal costs to themselves, their careers, and their families" (Lauk, 2023, p. 102). Due to the high-profile nature of their role, a superintendent's personal identity markers affect their professional identity, which in turn can result in questioning from educational stakeholders and teaching staff regarding the motivations behind a superintendent's policy choices. The personal and the professional become inextricably

tangled the higher an individual rises in the political sphere. Superintendents are more vulnerable to being seen as making biased professional decisions not in spite of their power and influence, but because of it.

Another challenge voiced by superintendents throughout the literature was the volume and time demands of administrative work involved in the role (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2019; Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020; Epps, 2020). Superintendents identified administrative work as a common cause of burnout, and many expressed that a central cause of frustration while trying to implement change came from “the bureaucratic burden that many of these reforms involve” (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2019, p. 469). Phrases like “the end of my abilities; growing burden; maddening and crazy activity; and drowning” (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2019, p. 469) were used to describe the experience of trying to manage the administrative burden. Superintendents found that completing menial administrative tasks came “at the expense of their pedagogic performances” (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2019, p. 469), resulting in schools and communities assuming that superintendents were prioritizing administrative duties over crucial divisional reforms. Despite wanting “to be more active in the field and in the schools and less in clerical work in the office” (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2019, p. 469), superintendents found that the administrative of their role significantly impeded their ability to implement the positive changes they envisioned for their divisions.

Stakeholder and school board resistance is another challenge identified by superintendents in the literature (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2019; Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020; Epps, 2020). Superintendents noted the resistance to implementing any kind of reform, as “almost every programmatic change involved some resistance” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 589) from stakeholders or the school board. Even a handful of voices in opposition to a reform

could mean its defeat, with one superintendent in a large, urban school division sharing that “You know, five constituents complain in a district this large, [the school board] will change course” (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2020, p. 589). Like superintendents, school board members face increased vulnerability due to their high-profile positions. This vulnerability can lead to school board members opting for the path of least resistance in the face of proposed policy changes; in other words, sticking to the status quo to keep voters with the loudest (or, more accurately, the most amplified) voices satisfied. This effect is further complicated by the reality that many school board trustees have students attending schools in the division, making their voices doubly amplified. “Superintendents consistently identified their organizational proximity to the school board as a potential leadership challenge”, write Coviello and DeMatthews (2020, p. 589).

Coviello and DeMatthews also note that superintendents “have a prominent function in translating[...] policy during implementation” (2020, p. 584) and are also responsible for “establishing structures and practices for maintaining engagement and communication with stakeholders in their districts” (2020, p. 584). The necessity of high-quality communication skills, and a knack for clear messaging, are key to any superintendent’s success, but particularly one who wishes to implement equity-based reform. A superintendent must maintain open, high-quality communication not only with the communities in which their division operates, the school board, policymakers such as the Department of Education, and students and their families (MASS Statement of Belief, 2024; The Education Administration Act, 2024). When equitable reform is not embraced by any (or all) of these groups, the burden of communication upon a superintendent grows.

Superintendents must also navigate an ongoing relationship and regular communication with their divisional staff. Arar and Avidov-Ungar (2019) note, “superintendents constitute a mediating link between policymakers and those who implement education policy in the field” (p. 462). Their research identifies that a central problem plaguing educational reforms is “the gap between the perceptions of policymakers and the perceptions of the field role-holders who hold the responsibility for implementation” (Arar & Avidov-Ungar, 2019, p. 462). Clear communication, therefore, is crucial to ensuring that teachers and principals understand the intent and goals of new policy, which in turn increases that policy’s chances of actually achieving those goals. Miscommunication can doom even the most well-constructed, hard-won policy.

Superintendent Policy Decision-Making

In his study of U.S. superintendents’ processes when dealing with professional dilemmas, Hart (2019) writes that “dilemmas faced by superintendents often stem from political and external forces that manifest through state and federal mandates” (p. 15). Managing these dilemmas requires creative, high-level thinking that may illuminate differences between the beliefs of the superintendent and the expectations of the organization, leading to conflict. Hart (2019) examined whether superintendents employed a rational approach to managing professional dilemmas, which “requires a step-by-step approach, including problem definition, generating alternatives, and implementing a solution after examining all options” (p. 16), or an intuitive approach, which employs a superintendent’s “quick, affectively charged, subconscious understanding of a complex situation related to experience-based, holistic associations” (p. 16) to find a solution.

Hart (2019) identified three dominant factors affecting superintendents’ decisions. The first factor was putting students first. The most frequent response by superintendents in Hart’s

study when asked about what they consider when managing a dilemma was “the belief that they should do what is best for students” (2019, p. 18). The second factor was the public context. Participants “were influenced by how they thought stakeholders would respond to their decisions” (Hart, 2019, p. 19), and often sought input from those who were going to be affected by the dilemma or decision at stake. The third factor was the importance of consulting. Superintendents shared that they were often “influenced by the opinions of advisors, frequently district leaders and fellow superintendents” (Hart, 2019, p. 19), and frequently reached out to colleagues who had managed similar dilemmas before. These findings have some overlap with Coviello and DeMatthews’ (2021) research into superintendents’ process of framing equitable change. They found that superintendent sensemaking around equity centered around four key elements: making sense of equity in context; stakeholder resistance and the school board; balancing vocal advocacy and professional vulnerability; and being strategic when framing equitable change (Coviello & DeMatthews, 2021, pp. 588-594).

Two major findings emerged in Hart’s (2019) research in response to the question on whether superintendents rely on a rational or intuitive approach to managing dilemmas. The first finding was that “more deliberate (rational) processes were used when time was not a limiting factor” (Hart, 2019, p. 20). The second was that superintendents’ decision-making “incorporated elements of the rational model with superintendents’ experienced-based intuition” (Hart, 2019, p. 19). These findings suggest that under time pressures, superintendents rely more heavily on experience-based intuition. While a crucial guidepost for leaders, experience-based intuition can also lead to the reproduction of inequality and bias. Intuition is rooted in individual lived experience; the decision-maker’s positionality impacts their intuition, which in turn impacts their decision-making. When the decision-maker is a straight white man, and he relies primarily on

experience-based intuition, those decisions may not benefit educational stakeholders who hold different, less privileged positionalities.

Sensemaking in Educational Leadership

In my review of the literature around superintendents and sensemaking, I found once again that the research was scant, particularly when looking for Canadian research conducted in the last decade. Instead, I rely here on American research, conducted in the past twenty years, to discuss the role of sensemaking in superintendent policy decisions. Welsh et al. (2021) define sensemaking as “a process of interpreting circumstances and information, which then leads to further calls for action” (p. 369). They point to sensemaking as a useful theory to consider when investigating how leaders understand, react, and change their institutions. In the context of this research project, situated in the public school system, sensemaking is a vital angle from which to understand the experiences and decisions of superintendents around 2SLGBTQIA+ policy. Leaders draw sense from the contexts – individual, social, institutional, political – around them, and build their decision-making around this sensemaking process. “The significance of the school leader becomes more critical when considering that sociopolitical and sociocultural issues play out in schools,” writes Evans (2007, p. 160). Amidst ever-increasing diversity and rapid-fire social change, agile school leadership requires superintendents to be sophisticated sensemakers in order to build a more equitable public school system moving forward.

Evans (2007) offers three central elements to sensemaking as a theory: it is socially constructed; it is context-specific, it is dependent upon how an individual makes sense of the cues from multiple, overlapping contexts; and it is always situated within a broader framework of socially acceptable actions and behaviours (pp. 161-162). Welsh et al. (2021) echo the highly contextualized nature of sensemaking, writing “the process does not occur in a vacuum, as

sensemaking is social and occurs collectively within an organization, being shaped by the interaction between members, involving signaling and negotiation” (p. 370). In their book *Navigating Uncertainty: Sensemaking for Educational Leaders*, Hasinoff and Mandzuk (2018) offer a 5-step framework for educational leaders to mobilize sensemaking when presented with a challenge. Each step invites the leader to ask a question, to build the context upon which their sensemaking will emerge. The five questions, in order, are: what incident or situation precipitated this problem or dilemma; who is involved; what do the relationships look like; what do I know for certain and what do I still need to know; and what are my next steps (Hasinoff & Mandzuk, 2018, p. 48).

As previously mentioned, current research connecting sensemaking to upper educational administration – and specifically to superintendents – is lacking. However, I did find one American study examining superintendent sensemaking. Donaldson et al. (2021), in their research examining superintendent evaluations of principals, found that superintendents’ sensemaking affected how they enacted state-level policies regarding principal evaluations. Superintendents in their study made sense of the policies using the contexts of their own personal experiences with evaluation, their district contexts, and their personal beliefs about the ‘real’ work of principals (Donaldson et al., 2021, pp. 10-11). Superintendents relied heavily on this sensemaking to guide how they understood and applied state policies around principal evaluation in their districts.

Summary

In this chapter, I began by defining several key terms which will be used throughout this thesis. Next, I reviewed current literature around superintendent positionality and queer-identifying superintendents. I shared my findings regarding discreet activism in leadership roles

in public education, approaches to transformative educational leadership, and barriers to superintendent equity work. Finally, I examined current literature on superintendent policy decision-making and sensemaking. Next, Chapter 3 will detail this project's methodology, including methodological framework, study design, and potential limitations.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

This research project investigates what factors (sociopolitical, institutional, and personal) might explain Manitoba superintendents' decision-making in reviewing, revising, creating, and/or leaving unchanged divisional policy documents relating to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues. By investigating superintendent sensemaking regarding processes of interaction with divisions' 2SLGBTQIA+ policies, as well as superintendents' sensemaking around the intent, content, and impact of their divisions' current 2SLGBTQIA+ policies, this research provides a detailed image of how current Manitoba superintendents understand and interact with queer-focused policies in their divisions.

This chapter opens with an explanation of the methodological framework used in this research project, followed by a description of the study design and interview guide. Next, there is a description of the participants of this study, and the recruitment and informed consent processes. Following this is an explanation of credibility, triangulation, and reliability in the data collection process, and a description of data analysis. Finally, this chapter concludes with a brief discussion of potential limitations of this study, and a summary of the chapter.

Methodological Framework

This research project employs an interpretivist philosophy. Interpretivism “refers to the approaches which emphasise the meaningful nature of people’s character and participation in both social and cultural life” (Chowdhury, 2014, p. 433). As a paradigm, interpretivism “assumes that reality is subjective and can differ considering different individuals” (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020, p. 42), and centers around the transient, ever-evolving nature of human experience, individually and collectively. Counter to the positivist philosophy, in which knowledge is viewed

as objective and tangible, interpretivist tradition asks researchers to consider social reality as viewed by the study subjects. Interpretivists examine an individual's behaviours and interactions with others across society and culture (Chowdhury, 2014) with the goal of understanding not only the actions of an individual but also the motivations or influences upon that action. Interpretivism does not only ask *what* has happened, but *why* and *how* it has happened. As this research study's central questions examine the factors influencing superintendents' decision-making processes, the interpretivist practice of looking not only "for the presence or absence of a causal relationship, but also the specific ways in which it is manifested and the context in which it occurs" (Chowdhury, 2014, p. 433) aligns directly with the research goals of this study. A central tenet of interpretivism is that researchers acknowledge the existence of their own beliefs and prejudgments about the social world, and position their research within the context of both the immovable reality of these biases and the ever-changing context of human society. In this way, interpretivism "[tells] narratives about a reality that was already an embodied set of narratives" (Blakely, 2020, p. 131). This double hermeneutic – "the view that social science is engaged in the interpretation of ongoing interpretive activity" (Blakely, 2020, p. 131) – is central to the interpretivist philosophy.

Fundamental to the interpretivist philosophy is the acknowledgment that a researcher cannot be separate from their research, and has inherent and inextricable influence on the research subjects and therefore the resulting data the research produces. In the interpretivist view, "it is argued that value free data cannot be obtained, since the enquirers use their own preconceptions in order to guide the process of enquiry, and furthermore, the researcher interacts with the human subjects of the enquiry, changing the perceptions of both parties" (Chowdhury, 2014, p. 433).

Multiple factors influenced my decision to employ an interpretivist philosophy over other potential philosophical approaches for this research project. The first important factor is interpretivism's interest in value neutrality over, or at least alongside, power. This research project examines issues of equity and power, certainly, but its two theoretical frameworks – a policy momentum framework and a queer democratic framework – already offer ample opportunity to examine the power dynamics at play regarding queer-focused policy in Manitoba public schools. It was therefore important to me to select a research philosophy that veered away from focussing primarily on examinations of power. “Interpretive traditions have a history of methodologically claiming value neutrality,” write Crawley and Plakhotnik (2023, p. 18), adding that interpretivism “[shuns] reference to power in favour of seeing what people do in interaction” (2023, p. 18). This study's central goal is to understand what factors might explain superintendents' decision making around queer policy. Through an interpretivist lens, this question becomes less about *who* wields power in Manitoba public school division policy conversations (or the moral repercussions of those power dynamics), and more about *how* that power and its possessors impact superintendents, who in turn impact policy outcomes

“A mistaken belief in the reality of organizations has diverted our attention from human action and intention as the stuff from which organizations are made,” writes educational administration scholar Thomas Greenfield (2005, p.1). Greenfield argues that the academic field of educational administration has suffered from impractical and inapplicable research under positivist paradigms (2005, pp. 38-46). He writes that the assumptions and beliefs used by positivist theorists lead to educational administration academics producing work that bears no relevancy to the lived experience of being an educational administrator. Along with encouraging his colleagues to shift away from positivist paradigms, Greenfield offers two suggestions to his

fellow scholars: focus on the specific rather than the general, and interrogate the relationship between the unique event and its context (Greenfield, 2005, p. 46). By applying an interpretivist lens, I adhere to Greenfield's advice of following the specific (the experiences of superintendents with 2SLGBTQIA+ policy) over the general (the overall experiences of queer students and staff) and interrogating the relationship between the unique event (lack of substantive changes to Manitoba public school 2SLGBTQIA+ policy) and its context (the current experience of being in Manitoba public school leadership).

When deciding on a research philosophy, I was also drawn to interpretivism's focus on the communicative. "Interpretive approaches to studies of relationships are unique in that they explore how relationships are constituted through communication," writes Manning (2013, p. 2509), adding that "because interpretive approaches assume interaction itself is what constitutes understandings of social worlds, interpretive qualitative studies are inherently communicative" (2013, p. 2509). In both a queer democratic theoretical framework and a policy momentum framework, communication is a central focus. What is understood to be (or has been) communicated; how; from whom; and to whom are all questions relevant to both frameworks. By employing an interpretivist philosophy, I am able to consider the answers to these questions from the dual lenses of both my research philosophy and my chosen theoretical frameworks.

A further justification for selecting interpretivism as this project's research philosophy is its connections to queer theory. Interpretivism is deeply concerned with the idea of performativity; the understanding that "people do not possess their social characteristics, like gender or citizenship, but are rather 'doing' them and 'become' constituted as subjects through the very same process of 'doing'" (Crawley & Plakhotnik, 2023, p. 8). Interpretivism's focus on performativity leads it to share connections to queer research paradigms. Consider in particular

Judith Butler's work around performativity and gender (1990): "Gender reality is created through sustained social performances," writes Butler (1990, p. 180). "If gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification, are performative, then there is no pre-existing identity by which an act or attribute might be measured" (1990, p. 180), Butler argues. Butler's assertion that gender is neither stagnant nor measurable aligns with interpretivism's ability to "[consider] temporalities explicitly and [recognize] that identities are always actively in production and actively negotiated with others – always in motion" (Crawley & Plakhotnik, 2023, p. 16). Interpretivism embraces "a dynamic mode of 'doing' and 'becoming' (rather than [focusing] on identity)" (Crawley & Plakhotnik, 2023, p. 18). Manning writes, "People make sense of this meaning through interaction, and, as such, meaning—both as it is perceived in the mind and as it is laden in objects or ideas in a social scene—is always in flux and continuously changing as people continue to interact" (2013, p. 2508). An interpretivist views interaction as the bedrock of sense- and meaning-making, performance as inherent to interaction, and incessant personal and social evolution as inherent to performance. In this way, interpretivism's "performative focus on *doing* thus *queers* the method," write Crawley & Plakhotnik (2023, p. 8).

Finally, interpretivism's focus on *doing* is also deeply relevant to this research project's central questions around superintendents' decision-making. By using an interpretivist framework, where "meaning is found across a social scene and the action in it" (Manning, 2013, p. 2508), the data analysis of this project will focus on "how people interact to make meaning rather than some inherent meaning to be found in an object or person's interpretation of an object" (Manning, 2013, p. 2508). This study does not prioritize the examination of superintendents' own personal views on queer-focused public school policy. It is not a witch-

hunt of anti-queer sentiment in Manitoba public school administration. Interpretivist philosophy guides this research project away a bleak binary of pro- or anti-queer educational leaders, away from trite categorization or gleeful finger-pointing, away from the spectacular or provocative. By applying an interpretivist lens, this study sidesteps the admittedly tempting path of identitarian rhetoric and focuses on understanding the factors – rather than the personal beliefs – that influence the decision-making processes of Manitoba public school superintendents.

Study Design

Semi-Structured Interviews

This study employs the qualitative methodology of semi-structured interviews. Commonly used in policy research (Harrell & Bradley, 2009), semi-structured interviews involve a dialogue between researcher and interviewee, with the researcher following a structured but flexible interview guide. The guide details specific questions and topics to be covered in the interview, but “sequencing and wording of the questions are modified to best fit the interviewee and interview context” (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, p. 2). The researcher can also supplement the interview question guide with follow-up questions, clarifications, and probes. In the context of a continuum from unstructured to highly structured, semi-structured interviews fall directly in the middle, providing some clear direction about the course and goals of the interview while also allowing both the participant and researcher to sustain a less rigid, more conversational interview.

Semi-structured interview guides can contain different types of questions, each with different goals. There are three primary question types: description questions, structural questions, and contrast questions. Descriptive questions provide researchers with details and context to understand what their interviewee is sharing. Structural questions help researchers

categorize, distinguish, and connect ideas or concepts related to their research questions.

Contrast questions help researchers understand the meaning behind terms, and their similarities and differences from other terms. The interview guide for this research project (see Appendix C) employs all three types of question.

When crafting an interview guide for semi-structured interviews, it is crucial to not only consider the questions you will pose, but also the sequencing of these questions. There are multiple methods of question sequencing, each of which offers specific direction to the conversation between participant and researcher. In a funnel protocol, the researcher begins with broad questions, then narrows in to more specific questions. This protocol is useful around sensitive topics, as it offers both researcher and interviewee time to get comfortable in the interview context before broaching difficult conversations. In an inverted funnel protocol, the researcher begins with specific questions (often background questions) before moving to more open-ended questions. This approach allows the researcher to gather important background information to contextualize the rest of the interviewee's responses. A tunnel method protocol of questioning involves a researcher asking many questions which are all similarly narrow in scope, and is often employed when there is limited time for an interview.

For this research project, I employ a combination of the funnel protocol and tunnel method. The interview guide begins with broad questions, in order to allow myself as the researcher and the interviewee time to build some trust and comfort in the interview setting. After several broad questions, the interview guide transitions into the tunnel method, with the majority of the questions all similarly narrow in scope in order to best make use of the limited time for the interview. The interview guide also contains a case study question where the interviewees are presented with a situation and asked how they would respond. This case study

question aims to provide a sense of each interviewee's thought and action process, and the hypothetical nature of a fictional case study means superintendents may be more likely to answer honestly, without fear of repercussion if their response is counter to their divisional policies or protocols.

The questions in the interview guide instrumentalize this research project's two theoretical lenses: policy momentum theory, and a queer democratic framework. The guide includes several questions which invite participants to reflect on the impact of provincial and federal political rhetoric, feedback from local community members, and the policy decisions of other Manitoban and Canadian school boards on their decision-making regarding 2SLGBTQIA+ policy. These questions mobilize policy momentum theory by investigating the role of policy diffusion (coercion, competition, learning, and emulation/mimicry) in impacting in Manitoba school divisions' 2SLGBTQIA+ policy, and examining whether this diffusion happened horizontally or vertically (either across structurally equivalent jurisdictions or from upper levels of governance down or lower levels of governance up). The guide also includes several questions about the role of queer consultation, student consultation, identity categories, and the intent and impact of queer-focused education policy. These questions mobilize a queer democratic framework by inviting participants to consider the role of identity categories in policy creation, and to reflect on what an 'opportunity worth wanting' looks like for 2SLGBTQIA+ students and staff in Manitoba's public education system.

The interview guide also applies an interpretivist lens. Interpretivism's goal of understanding the motivations or influences upon an individual's choices and behavior, in order to understand not just *what* has happened, but *why*, is reflected throughout the interview questions. Interpretivism is less focused on examining power and more focused on seeing how

that power impacts interactions between individuals. Therefore, the questions in this interview guide do not center around asking superintendents to reflect on who possesses power in public education and the moral implications of that reality. Instead, the interview questions apply an interpretivist lens by shifting the focus from how people make meaning individually to how people make meaning in interaction, and participants are invited to consider how their interactions with power and its possessors impact their decision-making around 2SLGBTQIA+ education policy.

I chose the semi-structured interview as the methodology for this research project for several reasons. Firstly, semi-structured interviews are “appropriate for addressing more complex social-behavioural research questions” (Adeoye-Olatunde, 2021, p. 1361) like the central research questions of this study. Secondly, the conversational, flexible nature of semi-structured interviews “permits interviews to be focused while still giving the investigator the autonomy to explore pertinent ideas that may come up in the course of the interview” (Adeoye-Olatunde, 2021, p. 1358). In order to collect the most high-quality data possible, it is crucial that I as the researcher can pursue further details or context from interviewees, rather than be limited by the rigidity of a more structured interview format. Finally, the semi-structured interview format is particularly useful for exploring “participant thoughts, feelings and beliefs about a particular topic and [delving] deeply into personal and sometimes sensitive issues” (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, p. 1). Talking about equity issues is complex, and can be stressful for a multitude of reasons. With its flexibility and conversational nature, a semi-structured interview format is ideally suited to facilitate nuanced sharing by supporting and empowering superintendent participants to speak freely during the interview process.

Despite its many strengths, the semi-structured interview format does also pose some specific challenges, which I will describe next, along with how I navigated these potential obstacles. One common problem with semi-structured interviews, and interviews more generally, is that not all participants are great interviewees. An interviewee may have a reluctance to share, be difficult to follow, be untruthful, or have any number of other characteristics that lower the quality or quantity of the interview data. Added to this complication is the inability of the researcher to prepare for this possibility; until the interview, it's unlikely that the researcher can predict the interviewee's nature. Since my interviewees will be superintendents, whose jobs require high-level communication skills, it was my expectation prior to conducting the interviews that participants would be able to clearly share their thoughts. As the interviewer, I did my best to draw out the most high-quality data from each interviewee with the understanding that while interviewees are able to articulate themselves clearly, there is no guarantee that they were fully transparent or honest in what they shared with me.

A second potential challenge of the semi-structured interview is inexperienced or unskilled interviewers. Common mistakes of rookie researchers include “not doing a good job of probing or asking for follow-up questions, failure to actively listen, not having a well-developed interview guide with open-ended questions and asking questions in an insensitive way” (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019, p. 7). To mitigate this potential challenge, I as the researcher prepared for the interview process by honing my own interview skills. This polishing of research skills was two-pronged, firstly through reading and research into best interview practices, and through mock interviews with colleagues to practice using my interview guide.

Participants

For this study, I wanted to curate a participant pool of no less than three and no more than five interviewees. The prospective participant pool was of all superintendents and assistant superintendents currently employed across Manitoba's 38 public school divisions. Participants were not offered compensation for time spent engaging with this research project. I had an unexpectedly smooth experience recruiting participants, which will be described in more detail in Chapter Four. As a result of the simplicity of the recruitment process, I did not need to mobilize a multi-step participant recruitment strategy. I will nonetheless detail the steps I took to recruit participants, as well as the further steps I had planned in the case of low recruitment numbers.

First, I sent an email to the superintendent of each school division, providing a basic description of myself and the research project (see Appendix A). All Manitoba superintendent and assistant superintendent contact information is publicly available on each school division's website. I received more than the maximum number of participants needed for this study through this initial email invitation. However, if I had received a reply from less than five prospective participants, my planned next step was to reach out to each Manitoba superintendent or assistant superintendent via phone call (see Appendix B). If I was still lacking participants after the phone messages, I would then have widened the potential participant pool to include retired or former Manitoba public school superintendents and assistant superintendents.

Through my initial email communication, I received interest in participating from over twice the number of participants I could accommodate in a study of this scope. I was therefore in the unique and fortunate position of curating my participant pool to yield the highest quality data. My criteria for participant selection: if more than five prospective participants express interest in

participating in the study, the 5 participants who represent the broadest spectrum of perspectives, taking into account gender, age, and race will be selected. For example, if 7 potential participants return signed consent forms but only one of them is a woman, she will receive one of the five participant slots. Following this curation of my participant list, I emailed all prospective participants who were not selected and informed them that all participant spots had been filled.

Confidentiality of participants was maintained through several mechanisms. Interviewees' data was not linked with their division; any identifying details regarding workplaces were removed, and any divisional documents referenced in interviews were renamed or referred to generally so the documents cannot be linked back to certain divisions. I relied on pseudonyms for each participant, and any information they provided that might identify themselves as individuals (including but not limited to race, gender, age, or work background) was removed. All prospective participants were informed of direct and indirect risks and benefits to their participation in the study, as well as how their confidentiality would be protected, via the consent form. Participants were invited to ask clarifying questions both before, during, and after their participation in the study regarding these issues.

Data Analysis

To ensure data reliability, I maintained a field journal of my own thoughts and reflections throughout the data-gathering process. I also removed all identity markers of interviewees immediately following transcription of the interviews, in order to help minimize my own bias as I worked with the data. To ensure high-quality triangulation, this study approaches data through two theoretical frameworks: a policy momentum framework and a queer democratic framework. The use of two frameworks ensures the balance and validity of this study's findings.

This study does not employ member checks. The primary reason for this decision is the lack of power imbalance between interviewer and interviewee. The participants are superintendents; they hold significant social power and status, as well as strong communication skills to express themselves. The power dynamic between the participants and I, the researcher, is therefore not lopsided; it can be reasonably assumed that participants are not being taken advantage of, and possess the skills and power to remove themselves from any situation in which they are not comfortable or satisfied. Therefore, member checks were not necessary to protect participants in the context of this research project. The second reason this study does not employ member checks is to ensure that participants do not have the opportunity to edit their responses in a way that would diminish the clarity of the data. As professional spokespeople, I anticipated that superintendents would, at times, give answers they perceived as most ‘correct’ rather than most accurate, or provide responses that reflected their divisions’ priorities and values rather than their own. Removing members checks prohibited participants from the opportunity to obfuscate or remove important data, either deliberately or unwittingly.

This research project uses coding to organize data. It employs a hybrid strategy, applying both deductive and inductive coding. The deductive codes – driven by the research I conducted during the literature review, my research questions, and my two theoretical frameworks – are ‘barriers,’ ‘influence,’ ‘policy intent,’ ‘policy impact,’ and ‘identity.’ The inductive codes were created after all data was collected, and were organized around sub-themes that emerged through initial interpretations of the data. To identify these sub-themes, I noted similarities and contrasts across the interview data, identified recurring ideas or concepts, and cross-checked them with the already existing deductive codes to avoid repetition or overlap during the coding and subsequent analysis processes.

Potential Limitations

One possible limitation of this study is that potential interviewees may have declined to participate if they felt their division has low-quality queer-focused policy, and the interviewees who did agree to participate did so because they felt confident in the high quality of their divisions' queer-focused policies. In other words, my participant pool may have become skewed towards those superintendents and assistant superintendents who are highly focused on equity-based policy, which in turn would offer an incomplete (and overly rosy) picture of the state of queer-focused policies in Manitoba public school divisions more broadly. As Campbell and MacGregor (2023) note, system educational leaders engaged in equity policy development are often those already positioned within, or committed to, equity-oriented frameworks, which can limit the representational diversity of perspectives in policy research. The purpose of this research project is not to build a detailed picture of the state of queer policy in school division across the province, but to examine the experiences and decision-making of a handful of superintendents regarding queer policy. Therefore, it is crucial to clarify that, even if my search for interviewees did yield only superintendents who are exceptionally engaged with their divisions' queer-focused policies, this research project can nonetheless engage with its central research questions and yield fulsome and valuable information for the field of equity-based education policy.

Another potential limitation of this study is the rapidly-evolving nature of the political landscape regarding queer issues. As described in Chapter One, the rhetoric around 2SLGBTQIA+ rights, particularly in public education, moves quickly. In the early stages of developing this research project, I reflected at length on how I could ensure that by the time my research was complete, it would still be both relevant and useful to the field of equity studies in

education. By focusing my research questions around the factors influencing Manitoba superintendents' decision-making regarding queer policy, rather than in the political context of the specific timeframe in which this research was conducted, I hope to ensure that my findings are rooted in the lived experiences of individual leaders in the field of education. This, in turn, offers the data a durability and applicability that extends beyond the specific timeframe (and therefore political landscape) during which the research was conducted.

Summary

This chapter began with an explanation of the methodological framework used in this research project, followed by a description of the study design and interview guide. Next, I described the participants of this study and the recruitment and informed consent processes. I detailed how I would maintain credibility and reliability in the data collection process, and my approach to data analysis. Finally, I concluded with a brief discussion of potential limitations of this study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter begins with a brief discussion of the recruitment process for this research project. Next is a review of the participant pool, including number of participants and participant demographics, as well as relevant background information. Then, I offer a brief outline of my coding process. Following this is a discussion of the findings, which are organized around six main themes that emerged from the data: ignorance; perceived competing rights and religion; school boards; external leadership vacuum; consultation; and backlash. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of key findings.

I have organized this thesis with Chapter 4 detailing the data this research yielded, and Chapter 5 providing analysis of the data. The rationale for this decision twofold. First, I want to ensure that readers understand the full context of the interview data. To that end, this chapter contains many block quotes, with the goal of removing any ambiguity around tone that might arise from paraphrased participant responses. Second, due to the successful recruitment of five participants, this project yielded a high volume of data. Combining findings and analysis into one would have resulted in an overly long chapter; having each section in its own chapter offers the reader a clearer, more logically structured document.

Recruitment & Participants

One of the primary concerns voiced by my committee during my thesis proposal for this research project was recruitment. Superintendents are not commonly participants in educational research, where the subjects are more often teachers or school administrators. Would superintendents be willing to find time for an hour-long interview in their busy schedules? As professional spokespeople, would they provide me with no more than rehearsed and watered-

down answers, void of personality or candor? Despite the assurance of anonymity, with a cohort of only 38 public school divisions in Manitoba, would superintendents feel too exposed to participate? Would they feel intimidated or suspicious of the ‘sensitive’ subject matter of my research project? I understood and echoed these concerns, but told my thesis committee that I was committed to this work and would move forward with the belief that I could recruit enough participants. They were supportive, but also advised that I expand the parameters of my participant criteria to include school-level administrators, in case my superintendent recruitment efforts fell short. I included this language in my ethics application, as well as adding that if less than three prospective participants expressed interest, I would widen the prospective participant pool to include retired or former Manitoba public school superintendents and assistant superintendents.

In fact, the recruitment process went better than either I or my thesis committee anticipated; none of the contingencies we had so carefully thought out were needed. I began sending out emails and phone calls to all superintendents and assistant superintendents across the 38 school divisions in Manitoba, and within one month I had a total of 11 superintendents and assistant superintendents willing to participate. These prospective participants represented a wide range of superintendency experiences – male and female, rural and urban school divisions, small and large student populations, and from many different regions of the province.

I realized I would have the privilege of curating a participant pool, rather than simply accepting the participation of anyone willing to give me their time. I followed the process outlined in Chapter 2 which detailed what I would do in the unlikely scenario of having more than 5 prospective interviewees willing to participate. First, I realized that based on the list of people interested in participating, I could curate a participant pool of exclusively currently

working superintendents; no assistant superintendents, and none who were retired or former superintendents. By having a participant pool of only actively working superintendents, I could assure that I was getting the most current, relevant, and accurate data regarding queer policy decision-making from the highest-level employee in a school division. Next, I selected interview candidates who represented both rural and urban school divisions, to ensure data would encompass the diversity of policy experience for superintendents across different geographical – and therefore different political – community contexts. Finally, I selected three male and two female superintendents, in order to gain as broad an understanding as possible of how a superintendent's gender might impact their decision-making around queer policy. I did not take into consideration age, stage in career, or other identity elements, for two central reasons. Firstly, most superintendents are of a similar age and stage in their career, as superintendency is typically a role for those in the final third of their careers, after time spent as teachers and school administrators. Secondly, as the pool of current superintendents in Manitoba is only 38 people, naming any identity markers other than sex and general school division location could compromise the confidentiality of participants.

Another surprise during the recruitment process was the degree of interest by superintendents in the eventual research findings. Multiple prospective participants, when contacted, communicated that they could not participate, but would be interested in the findings and requested that I send them the thesis upon its completion. Several mentioned the lack of current research around queer policy, superintendents, or both. I also had two prospective participants mention educational leadership groups who they believed would be interested in the study's findings, and offered me the contact information of the relevant personnel so I could reach out to schedule presentations and/or meetings once the research was complete. After

spending months worrying that my recruitment efforts would result in nothing more than ignored emails and unanswered phone calls, to have such enthusiastic engagement and interest in the study's topic was another welcome surprise of the recruitment process.

The recruitment process also revealed a fascinating range of policies in place across Manitoba public school divisions regarding applications to conduct research. The University of Manitoba's Research Ethics Board deemed that it would be necessary for me to request divisional approval to conduct research before I could accept a superintendent's offer to participate in the study. This was a challenge, as processes across divisions vary, but it is often the superintendent themselves (sometimes in collaboration with school board members) who signs off on research approvals. Once I had selected my ideal candidate pool from the larger group of superintendents who had indicated interest in participating, I set about acquiring research approval from each of their divisions.

I first assumed the process to get research approval would be standardized across divisions; there would be an Administrative Procedure document or a clear policy in place that laid out who to contact, and what individuals or group made the final decision on whether a researcher could conduct their study in a division. However, what I learned was that research approval processes varied greatly across divisions. It was my then assumption that the larger, metro school divisions (the six school divisions in Winnipeg city limits) would have more detailed research approval processes, including forms to fill out, advisory panels containing divisional leaders who would meet quarterly to discuss any research applications. It was also my assumption that smaller divisions, often less prone to red tape, would have simpler research approval processes.

In reality, I learned that the size of a division bears no connection to the complexity of its research approval process. At least one of Manitoba's six metro school divisions only required an assistant superintendent sign-off to approve research projects. By contrast, several of the smaller, rural school divisions I contacted required that a research project application be put before their school board; in some divisions, this was only deemed necessary if the proposed research included 'sensitive topics', while in others it was required for all applications. When I reached out by phone to rural superintendents, I experienced several phone calls that all followed a similar pattern. The superintendent would recall the email I had sent them detailing my research project, and they would stop me before I could continue and say, "That would have to go before my board." I did not ask, during the phone calls, what the superintendents thought the outcome of my proposal going before their school board would be; in retrospect, I regret not doing so. In the case of the divisions where there was no 'sensitive content' caveat, it would have been interesting to hear whether superintendents anticipated any concern from their school boards over the queer focus of my research. In the case of the divisions where research applications dealing with 'sensitive content' must be sent to the board for review, I regret not asking the superintendent on the phone whether they thought the board would approve the research or not, and why. I also wish I'd inquired into their research application policy, and why the 'sensitive content' caveat was deemed necessary in their division. Ultimately, I received permission from the five divisions of my participants – some through the superintendent themselves simply signing the approval, others through the school board meeting and approving the application – and was then able to proceed with interviews.

Despite my rookie researcher error of not asking follow-up questions while on the phone with these superintendents, the vast differences in research application policies across Manitoba

public school divisions nonetheless invites deeper questions around access to and silencing of superintendent voice on issues of equity in their divisions. I wonder which superintendents I contacted had read my email, and immediately identified that, though they would like to participate, their board would never approve queer-focused research. The lack of research around queer public school policy and superintendent decision-making suddenly made more sense. Despite being in charge of writing school policy – including equity-based policy, which is often perceived to deal with ‘sensitive content’ – superintendents in many Manitoba public school divisions must receive board approval before speaking about those policies to researchers. While not the focus of this particular research project, further investigation into research application policies in Manitoba school divisions would provide valuable understanding around the ways in which superintendents are permitted to or silenced from speaking to researchers about ‘sensitive topics’ in their divisions.

Codes/Themes

Initial Coding Process

To code my findings, I used a hybrid strategy, employing both deductive coding (based on the themes that emerged in the literature review, my research questions, and my two theoretical frameworks) and inductive coding (based on sub-themes that emerged from initial analysis of the data). The initial deductive codes were “barriers,” “influence,” “policy intent,” “policy impact,” and “identity.” To identify inductive codes, I did two initial read-throughs of the interview transcripts, pulling quotes that stood out to me and placing them into broad categories. I continued rereading the transcripts, pulling more quotes and breaking categories into smaller, sub-categories. The chart below (Table 2) illustrates the connections between themes, sub-themes, and the research questions they most directly engage with.

Table 2: Data Themes, Sub-themes, and Research Question Connections

Theme	Sub-themes	Research Question Connection
Ignorance	- the vernacular of queerness - uncritical acceptance of school as a place of unconditional safety	What factors (sociopolitical, institutional, and personal) might explain Manitoba superintendents' decision-making in reviewing, revising, creating, and/or leaving unchanged divisional policy documents relating to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues?
Perceived Competing Rights and Religion	- failure to uphold current policies - 'harm reduction' - increased volume of anti-queer rhetoric from stakeholders	How do Manitoba superintendents navigate and make sense of their processes of interaction with their divisions' 2SLGBTQIA+ administrative procedures and policy documents, including catalyst events, queer consultation, and policy rollout?
School Boards	- trustee election cycles - silence on school boards about queer issues - risks to superintendent employment	What factors (sociopolitical, institutional, and personal) might explain Manitoba superintendents' decision-making in reviewing, revising, creating, and/or leaving unchanged divisional policy documents relating to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues?
External Leadership Vacuum	- superintendent workload - lack of guidance from Manitoba School Boards Association, Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, and Department of Education - absence of queer-focused professional development opportunities for superintendents	What factors (sociopolitical, institutional, and personal) might explain Manitoba superintendents' decision-making in reviewing, revising, creating, and/or leaving unchanged divisional policy documents relating to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues?
Consultation	- feedback mechanisms - uncertainty around how to appropriately approach queer individuals for consultation - uncritical acceptance that queer staff are safe to come out	How do Manitoba superintendents make sense of and interact with the intent, content, and impact of the current 2SLGBTQIA+ administrative procedures and policies in their divisions?
Backlash	- fear of the political volatility of queer-focused policy changes - lack of clear process around policy development and rollout - post-COVID increase in anti-queer rhetoric both locally and globally	How do Manitoba superintendents navigate and make sense of their processes of interaction with their divisions' 2SLGBTQIA+ administrative procedures and policy documents, including catalyst events, queer consultation, and policy rollout?

These sub-categories reflected the language of the participants, and were identified using this project's two theoretical frameworks: policy momentum theory, and a queer democratic framework. Below, I name and illustrate the primary codes that emerged from my research data.

Ignorance

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, when embarking upon this research I was concerned that superintendents' lack of knowledge around queerness would, understandably, translate to a reticence or highly scripted approach to speaking about queerness and queer experience. It was my expectation that my interviewees would choose words carefully, and would stick to simply responding to direct questions rather than expanding at length on their answers. These are professional spokespeople, and I expected a level of political shrewdness in their responses. While some of the interviewees were more deliberately concise than others, I was generally surprised by the degree of honesty and vulnerability participants displayed. Throughout the interviews, participants spoke with candor on issues they acknowledged not knowing much about. Their generosity to share truthfully about their leadership choices and their own learning journeys are an immeasurable gift to this research project's quality, and the tools it produces to support future policy-makers. However, their candor also produced the quotes I will share in this section; quotes that reveal profound bias and privilege, soundbites during the interviews that left me at a literal loss for words, scrambling to look down at my interview guide to remember my next question. It's important for me to acknowledge the tension present in sharing these quotes; I'm deeply grateful for the generous participation and honest responses of my research participants, but academic rigor demands that I nonetheless name and analyze *all* of what they've shared, not just the part that cast them in a favourable light.

In the early phases of coding my transcripts, I struggled to find a code to connect a group of quotes I felt were all nebulously connected. I had lumped together a series of comments from participants that had stood out to me the moment the participant said it; for most of them, I remember the exact moment I heard the words come out of their mouth. Despite immediately identifying the quotes as important, it took me several attempts to arrive at a code that encompassed what the quotes represented: ignorance. I have reflected on why it took me so long to name what will likely be, for you the reader, an obvious code to encompass the following quotes. The conclusion I've arrived at is that, before embarking on this research, I placed superintendents on a pedestal based on assumptions around their knowledge, competence, and professionalism. This project has reminded me that superintendents, like all people, are flawed and complex individuals, and as capable of both excellence and incompetence as anyone else.

During the first fifteen minutes of my very first interview, the participant, a rural superintendent, asked me: "I don't know, are we allowed to use the word gay? We're allowed to use the word gay, correct?" This superintendent also repeatedly fumbled any kind of acronym to represent the queer community, and would then apologize for "not saying the whole thing." This is the individual who writes the policies protecting the queer community, but who themselves literally cannot name the community they are purporting to protect. The participant also used the term "reverse racism" to describe an Indigenous parents confronting a white educator.

The vernacular of queerness stumped several of interviewees. One superintendent of a large, urban school division referred to the queer community as "people who identify in a non-traditional way." Another stumbled over the acronym several times, then referred to 2SLGBTQIA+ people primarily as "members of that community" for the remainder of the

interview. When describing a friend who came out as gay, one superintendent reflected that their friend group had “always suspected” and that “there are some tells.”

Several participants also struggled to grasp that homophobia and transphobia still exist – despite the vast body of research demonstrating the ongoing impacts of homophobia and transphobia, particularly on children – with one superintendent sharing: “I think I’d be really shocked. I’d be shocked to hear of that kind of behaviour amongst students still, like, students having hangups about sexuality or gender. It just doesn’t seem like it’s nearly as common anymore.” This participant went on to describe how they perceived the culture of their division for queer staff and students – despite acknowledging that they’ve never had a conversation with a queer staff member or student about their experiences as queer people in the division. It’s important to note that, in the same interview, this participant detailed the ongoing pushback in their division to queer literature and programming, including a 50% absenteeism rate on Pride Walk days, which the superintendent shared was causing them concern for the psychological safety of queer students and staff. The participant went on to share:

I mostly get the impression I – I would describe it as like, maybe this is letting everyone off the hook too easily, but it’s like, mostly people don’t care. Mostly people don’t care anymore... I think the majority of people, anyways, are just like beyond thinking very much about it.

Another participant, while reflecting on their continued decision not to create a library policy despite several book banning attempts by community members, shared that they didn’t want to create a policy because, “If everybody does what they’re supposed to do, there really shouldn’t be any issues.”

Following an interview question about queer teachers in their division, one participant segued into an unprompted commentary on the differences between queer educators' experiences based on gender:

I think it's actually still different for men than women. I don't know the right way to say it, but like on a spectrum of whatever stereotype of homosexuality, there would be a place on that spectrum, particularly for men, I think, where things would get more challenging.

This thesis project is my first foray into academic research. As a rookie researcher, I was concerned about making critical errors during the interview process, and prepared extensively (as detailed in Chapter 3) by speaking with more seasoned researchers about their research approaches, drafting potential follow-up questions and extension questions, and reading about best practices for academic research interviewers. Despite this preparation, superintendent responses like the ones shared in this section left me scrambling for what to say next. To be blunt, my error in preparation for these interviews was to underestimate the degree to which some of my interviewees were either comfortable displaying ignorance, or were simply ignorant. Most of the time, after an interviewee said something that set off a red light in my head, like the quotes above, I let the silence sit for a moment – in case the superintendent wanted to add to what they had said – and then moved on to the next question. I regret not crafting better follow-ups, either improvised in the moment or prepared in advance, to dig deeper into the more problematic thoughts and beliefs my interviewees shared.

Perceived Competing Rights & Religion

One of the first codes I identified in my data was religion, specifically perceived competing rights between religion and the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. Superintendents spoke

repeatedly about conversations with parents and caregivers in their divisions, and explained that often these conversations centered around religious rights. The superintendent of a large, urban school division shared:

There were some times where I had conversations with parents who interpreted words in the policy in a different way than they were intended to be, or tried to twist it in a different way than it was intended to be. Almost like, how do I say it? A reverse human rights. They would come forward, and usually it was religion, right? My religion doesn't align with this, and I don't want my children exposed to this. And they would come forward with, you're trumping my human rights by allowing this policy or allowing these activities to happen in schools. And those were very, very difficult conversations to navigate.

Later in the interview, the same superintendent spoke about complaints from parents and caregivers regarding their division's Manitoba Teachers' Society 'Safe and Inclusive Spaces' posters, which depict a pride flag:

I had lots of questions about why is that poster up, and that that poster is excluding people of certain religious values, trumping on their beliefs because of it being posted. And again, it just seems to have been a growing anti-whatever voice of competing human rights... I would say for me, some of it feels like hatred cloaked in religion.

The superintendent went on to describe trying to reason with parents who were angry about the poster and requesting it be removed:

One of the conversations I clearly remember was about the flag and that poster from MTS, the Safe and Inclusive Spaces on, and people asked for it to be taken down. And I tried to equate that to another protected characteristic under the Human Rights Code... So

if you came into a classroom and you saw pictures of Black children or adults or celebrities on the wall, would you ask for that to be taken down? People aren't coming forward for Black History Month saying you can't do that in schools... Yet for Pride Month, they are coming forward saying that. So I always tried to go back to: it's the same protected characteristic. But I think people knew that, heard that, but it was just so very, what would you say, ingrained in their religion. They could not move past that.

Another superintendent also shared about experiences with religion-based opposition to 2SLGBTQIA+ rights. They explained that their division saw extremely high absence rates across the division during Pride Walks, and reflected that:

It might speak to the pre-teaching that needs to happen. You know, before this Pride Walk occurring within a school. But in a couple of contexts, I don't think it's even... It's even going to be that. It's going to be the muddiness of, of this parental rights, and religious rights, and all that comes into play.

Similarly, another interviewee shared:

There have been lots of challenges, incidents, I don't know what quite the right word is, but happenings in schools, and our staff and our principals in particular have felt the need to have discussions about how do I handle this? How do I hold care for all perspectives? How do I navigate through these difficult conversations when there are perceived competing rights?

Religious pushback to 2SLGBTQIA+ focused programming is so loud that Manitoba superintendents and superintendents have come to expect it. Troublingly, this anticipation of religious outcry to queer inclusion leads some school leaders to pre-emptively remove the trigger

of religious outrage entirely by removing queer programming and learning. One interviewee of a small, rural school division shared:

I'll say this, actually, now I'm reflecting on this. I had one school principal who told me they don't do a lot of LGBTQ stuff because of their community. And I remember thinking, you know, and I definitely asked some follow-up questions about that. Newer principle, by the way. So she was nervous about getting in the weeds. But she's... she was very reflective that she works in a really conservative, religious community.

Data from this research project illustrates that it's not just rural school divisions where divisional leaders are following the lead of 'religious rights' or 'parental rights' anti-queer activism. The legally unsubstantiated but ever-present objections to queer presence in public schooling by religious individuals and organizations repeatedly described by interviewees creates a chilling effect on queer inclusion in both urban and rural school divisions. The superintendent of a large, urban school division explained:

On the afternoon or the morning of a Pride Walk, you're looking at 50% absenteeism. Along with a tone, that is speaking to, "I won't be there." So it's not just the absenteeism, but it's the conversation that's happening.... I had to put on the table: do we take this pride walk out of the hands of schools and do it divisionally? To try and take away, you know, the unsafe space... But you know, in trying to gain a momentum division-wide in this. Because very much this is becoming, you know, if it continues in this direction, it's not an inclusionary activity. If I have, you know, and I don't mean to oversimplify this, but if I have a math lesson on fractions and 50% of the class isn't getting it, so to speak, do I put my head in the sand and keep going with the same strategy?

By suppressing queer-inclusive programming, school leaders grant those protesting for ‘religious rights’ or ‘parental rights’ the very result that their outcry intended to produce, and betrays divisional leaders’ legal and moral obligations to provide a queer inclusive public school system for students.

This lack of upholding already-established legal and social precedent around 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion in schools extended to ignoring current divisional policy for one rural superintendent. They described how, on the day of one school’s June Pride Walk, any student who had a letter from their parent or caregiver stating the child would not be participating was allowed to remain at school, but sat out the Pride Walk. This was not supported by their divisional policy, which stated that only activities that took place off-campus required parent permission and therefore had an opt-out option. The superintendent explained that their decision to allow opt-outs – and sidestep their own divisional policy – was based on the amount of parent and caregiver pushback to the Pride Walk. Moreover, the superintendent thanked parents who opted out for sending their students to school, and affirming that the division would support their decision to opt out their students, despite the opt-out not being supported by any divisional policy:

Yeah, based on the volatility of it, we kinda... we probably didn’t follow our policy to a T... I just, you know, respected student and parent wishes around that with a kind of inclusive lens. Like, we’re having a pride walk because we’re inclusive, and if you don’t believe in this, we still want you at school that day. And I, you know, actually, I did thank those parents, saying, like, thank you for sending your kid to school that day, because they can’t afford to miss that day and we’ll respect your decision.

Several interviewees referenced protecting 2SLGBTQIA+ students from harm as justification for removing or rolling back queer-inclusive school programming. They argued that having a Pride Walk or flying the Pride flag would in fact cause queer students more harm than the division not taking those inclusive actions. One superintendent said:

There are dark things in our world that we have a responsibility to introduce students to in good ways and in good time, you know? And that's a moving target... to teach kids about injustice and prepare them for it, but also not like, inflict it upon them; protecting them at the same time.

It's crucial for educational leaders to understand that reducing 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion in public school divisions – removing the opportunity for queer students to see futures worth wanting for themselves, and to gather in community with other queer people – is precisely the goal of religion-based objections. It's also crucial for educational leaders to identify the profound dangers queer students face when these opportunities for inclusion are removed. The superintendents I interviewed failed to grasp this concept. Instead, by reducing or cancelling inclusive programming in response to religious opposition, Manitoba superintendents demonstrate to the public that homophobic and transphobic voices speaking out in the name of 'religious freedom,' if persistent enough, have the power to permeate the Manitoba public school system.

School Boards

Another recurring topic throughout the interview process was the role and influence of school boards on superintendent decision-making. One repeated concern amongst participants was how easy it is to become a school trustee in Manitoba. One superintendent shared:

It's not very hard to become a trustee in Manitoba. And so I wonder if there's any

different path forward that way to prevent that sort of activism from coming on easily to a board in a time when public education's sort of taking a beating for a bunch of reasons, and maybe people shy away from becoming a teacher or a trustee. Trusteeship can sometimes be in the political realm. It's lower on the continuum. So sometimes you get more activism, I think, in trusteeship than you might on city council or town council.

Interviewees shared concerns that, without more competition for trustee seats, right-wing activism would continue to rise in public school boards across the province. One superintendent reflected:

I don't have the circumstance that almost all of my colleagues do, which is, there's at least one on every board that's like, you know, I don't know how to describe it, but you know that they're coming with a particular kind of agenda, and nowadays that agenda is often fuelled by some amalgam of anti-diversity.

There are only 38 public school superintendents in Manitoba, and interviewees often reflected on the ways that their colleagues were affected by trustee elections and board dynamics. One superintendent reflected, “I think rural boards are vulnerable in particular, although honestly, I think that almost every city board has one trustee that's kind of got some of that stuff going on.” Participants also reflected on the impact of school board composition for teachers, with one superintendent noting, “I don't think teachers know how vulnerable they are to the trustee election cycle. But they are.”

One sub-theme that emerged was the role that school boards play in conversations around 2SLGBTQIA+ policy discussions. Specifically, the data that emerged from the interviews illustrated that school boards silence queer-centric conversations. Participants spoke about the lack of board discussion on queer issues, but offered no personal accountability as divisional

leaders or education experts as to why there was such silence at a board level. Nor did they reflect on the harm that that silence might be causing on the queer students and staff in their divisions, particularly as public schools across the nation face an unprecedented rise in anti-queer rhetoric and activism. Regarding board discussions of 2SLGBTQIA+ issues, one superintendent said:

No, there really hasn't, and it's been interesting because sometimes I wonder, like, we're a pretty conservative part of the province, we're polarized like a lot of places to be honest with you.... I would say, like, with [2SLGBTQIA+], it's not something people want to talk about. So they want to talk about the Indigenous piece, but I don't see a lot of appetite for that topic [queerness] at the board table, which is interesting.

Several interviewees shared that their boards were uncomfortable talking about queer issues, and trustees would therefore avoid those conversations to preserve their own comfort and not be forced to share their beliefs on 2SLGBTQIA+ policy. Said one superintendent:

Yeah, like, I think certain topics are easier to talk about, and I think like we would have some staff, some board members would be very comfortable in that conversation. And then we would have some board members that would not want to have that conversation. Like, they would just... they're not comfortable. And part of that could be lack of knowledge base, lack of exposure... New learnings make us feel awkward. It makes us feel uncomfortable... Nobody wants to give that sound bite, even in-camera. Because they know if they give that sound bite, another board member, or possibly me, might light them up.

In the quote above, the superintendent frames board discomfort over queer issues as stemming from lack of knowledge or exposure. While this may be partially true, the participant has also

notably used this reasoning to pivot away from suggesting that the deliberate silence indicates that some trustees may hold homophobic or transphobic views. As noted in the next section of this chapter, superintendents are hired, renewed, and fired by the board, and therefore must ensure they are meeting the board's expectations in order to retain their employment. This dynamic can create a schism between a superintendent's beliefs and those of their board regarding any issue, including 2SLGBTQIA+ policy. On the few occasions where interviewees shared queer topics that did make it into school board discussions, they clarified that no policy change was implemented as a result of the discussion. One participant reflected on the "1 Million March 4 Children" marches held in September of 2023, sharing:

Probably on that day, we had, you know, system-wide, about 4,000 absences. So yeah, for those reasons, it did become a discussion at the board level. But you know, did that trend into any sort of policy review? No, it didn't.

Another sub-theme that emerged was the power dynamic between a superintendent and a school board. Participants shared their frustrations at the power that a board has over a school division's direction and strategic plan. Several interviewees made reference to the recent book-banning attempts and anti-queer public presentations made in the Brandon School Board, Louis Riel School Board, and Prairie Rose School Board, noting that superintendents have little power in those situations. One superintendent reflected, "A board can make any policy it wants as long as it doesn't go against legislation. Yeah, it's difficult."

Another participant highlighted the nature of their relationship to the board in terms of employment:

You know, working with a board can sometimes be, as you have probably seen in the media a lot in the last couple years; it can be challenging. We have a really good board.

I'm really blessed. But... a year from now, we're going to have full board elections, which, you know... And my job is political. That makes superintendents nervous, because the board can switch quickly. And the board might not be enamored with me anymore, right?

Ultimately, superintendents are hired and fired by school boards. The nature of this arrangement means that superintendents must walk a fine line when they disagree with a board's view; they can attempt to educate or persuade the board to take a different stance on an issue, but in doing so they potentially risk their own job security. One participant illustrated this tension by reflecting on situations that have arisen in other divisions:

Like the school divisions where some trustees got into it with the staff about ally cards and things like that. Or that other board where they wanted to change their hiring practices so that board were responsible for hiring very specific staff members, including physical education teachers and music teachers, and it was no secret that the reason was because of the things related to sexuality related to those jobs.

In the situations mentioned above, the superintendent had to act as the go-between for the board and either the public, divisional staff, or both; all while balancing their own personal stance on the issue with the need to maintain a working relationship with the board and to protect their job security.

External Leadership Vacuum

Rural superintendents reflected extensively on their professional isolation and workload, sharing how smaller budgets and not having assistant superintendent positions impacted their ability to make sound policy decisions. Shared one participant: "It's basically just everything

kind of falls on my shoulders, if there's not someone to do it." Another rural participant echoed this sentiment, sharing their experience when coming into the role of superintendent:

There's not a lot of orientation, you just kind of jump into it and figure it out... Some of these things, I feel like I walked into the job with a pretty good understanding. Other things, it was like, really? This is how we do this? Like, who do I call?

Rural divisions are staffed differently than large, urban divisions, which often results in superintendents having less access to crucial data that could inform higher-quality equity-focused policy. Reflecting on their struggles to manage the influx of anti-queer activism in their division, one rural superintendent shared:

I don't know. Maybe because you're talking to city people too, maybe they're not having as big an issue as the rural people do, because it's a bigger center. And the other thing, too, is, and I'm sure you realize it. We're staffed very differently. Like, you know, you look at Winnipeg School Division, you look at Louis Riel School Division. They have an assistant superintendent of diversity, equity, and inclusion. I'm the only person here, I have to fill all these roles myself.

Workload and access to data and external consultation were mentioned repeatedly by rural superintendents as challenges to crafting high-quality queer policy. However, urban superintendents also expressed wanting more direction and leadership to guide their equity work. Several participants, across both urban and rural divisions, shared that they felt there was a lack of direction and leadership on queer issues from their governing bodies: the Manitoba Department of Education, the Provincial Government, MASS (Manitoba Association of School Superintendents), MSBA (Manitoba School Board Association), and MASBO (Manitoba Association of School Business Officials).

One superintendent shared that a board in Manitoba had recently proposed a resolution to MSBA for the association to create a code of conduct for school boards. The intention behind the resolution was to ensure if trustees were using hate speech or making false claims, that could be shut down because it would be a code of conduct violation. The resolution was put forward following several school boards having trustees or members of the public using hate speech or making false claims, and the superintendent and/or rest of the board not having a mechanism to shut those presentations down or admonish the board member involved. MSBA did not pass that resolution, though the superintendent shared that MSBA has indicated they are looking at how they can provide more clear guidance to school boards on what is and is not acceptable trustee and board behaviour. Shared one participant: “Some of our local associations have been too hesitant to take a formal stand on these things, and that includes the MSBA.”

As mentioned in the previous section, trustee elections are an ongoing concern for superintendents, who feel their boards are particularly vulnerable to right-wing activism due to a lack of candidates running for seats. One participant shared the role they would like to see MSBA take in supporting superintendents with this challenge, and highlighted what they perceived to be MSBA attempting to remain ‘neutral’ around issues of diversity:

Well, the MSBA was, in fact, really active in publishing all kinds of what I would say was like thinly veiled encouragement for trustees of a certain mindset. You know, a mindset that embraces diversity to run. And so I just feel like, if you're gonna do that, why not formalize it? [...] Be forthcoming about the fact that you don't want boards to be populated by people that have an anti-diversity agenda. Like, formalize that, instead of doing it in this way where you're trying not to take a side. It's just nonsense.

Participants also emphasized the increased role that MASS could play in supporting superintendents and pushing MSBA for further leadership on equity as superintendents navigate rising anti-queerness in their divisions, with one participant sharing: “I think MASS could actually be more active in trying to push MSBA and to make sure that we don’t get this kind of weirdness that’s happening in Hanover and Mountain View, and probably elsewhere.”

Another participant reflected on MASS’s lack of leadership and reflected on how it forced the superintendents to take on more work to protect themselves and their professional autonomy:

I think MASS has come around to making some kind of public statement about [the book banning and board presentations stuff]. But I do think MASS could do a better job... I'm in the process of trying to put something in a new contract for myself that hopefully helps clarify in advance of the next trustee election that, like, that's the board's job up here, and my job is all this stuff. Don't mess with it.

This action from this superintendent was prompted by the actions of several school boards to take over staff hiring decisions that fell under the job responsibilities of the superintendent, as mentioned in a quote from earlier in this chapter.

Participants also brought up the critical role the provincial government and the Department of Education play in influencing and supporting equitable education policy. Some participants expressed wanting more clear and detailed direction from the Department of Education. One interviewee shared:

I think the Department of Education should provide greater clarity and direction. I think they're letting themselves off the hook on some matters, especially when we're talking about human rights and they're not just saying, everybody's going to have this [AP or

policy] – the end. So they leave divisions to their own devices for figuring out how to navigate some very challenging territory. And I think the reason for this is obviously to just not assume blame that they can otherwise offload to school divisions.

The participant went on to share that they felt the Department of Education should have much more detailed documents regarding common situations superintendents face regarding queer issues, such as hotel room assignments on field trips for trans and nonbinary students:

My feeling is that the department should be much more clear about, at a minimum, description that's thorough and granular on all these kinds of questions. And maybe it sounds like I'm trying to pass the buck, but I think it's harmful and risky to leave the impression with local populations that they can deviate from something that is human rights.

However, not all participants agreed that more detailed policy language from the Department of Education would be useful. One participant described the flexibility that the Department of Education leaves for divisions to tailor-make their queer-focused policy in more neutral terms, sharing:

The province is pretty good at giving us talking points, but there is a lot of leeway to make it fit your current reality. That aside, it's always in your best interest [to use similar language to what they provide], because it should read similar, division to division.

In contrast, one participant strongly opposed divisions having leeway to tailor their queer-focused policy, explaining:

One school division is actually using 'local choice, local voice' now as a means by which to try and argue that, like, our local folks don't see it that way. And if we're saying local choice, local voice, that means we should be able to have our own way of doing this,

right? You need the Department of Education and the Provincial Government to say, nope, this is what it is, this is what we're doing. This is how we're going to support people. We're going to live up to human rights legislation. So to me, that's a real miss, I think.

In terms of specific policies put out by the government that the participants found helpful, four of the five superintendents mentioned *Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Manitoba School*, a 2017 document released by the Government of Manitoba, as a practical resource, with one participant sharing:

I think that was a great document. You know, we get a lot from the province where it's like, holy cow, this is brutal. That document was a document I went through with my highlighter, right? Like, it was a good document and it was applicable to some changes to our school handbook and stuff based on some things in there. There were actionable items that we brought to staff meetings to have those vulnerable conversations on topics.

Notably, the *Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Manitoba School* document repeatedly states that it is not legally binding, and a division may seek out its own legal counsel with respect to the guidelines of the document. Further, the *Frequently Asked Questions* section of the document states, “this document is not a policy document that imposes specific requirements on schools, nor is it a curriculum document” (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017, p. 1).

One participant also shared gratitude for the current Manitoba NDP government, as well as concern regarding future political climates, explaining:

I'm concerned with the bigger geopolitical climate that we're living in right now, and what that does to policy. And I guess I'm thankful right now for who we have in

government in Manitoba when it comes to this type of work and policy. I worry if that changes in the next election or two, what that means for setbacks.

However, the general consensus amongst participants was that the Department of Education could be doing more to support superintendents in advancing the quality of queer education policy, as well as in combating rising anti-queer rhetoric in their divisions.

One participant identified teacher training programs as another group that could be doing more to support equitable policy in the public school system. They shared:

I think things need to become embedded. They need to become more systematic. So in teacher training preparatory programs, I think some of that has to take place in conversations in classes... So that if you're gonna come and work in this profession, you're going to have somewhat of an understanding of the conversations that might take place and the curriculums that might guide you and the documentation to go to when you need language.

Finally, one participant shared their view that collective bargaining could be used to achieve a more equitable school system, and protect divisional staff from school boards or superintendents upholding inequitable policies:

If you think about policy as a lever for [equitable] change... I would go further and say that collective bargaining agreements are actually an under-used mechanism for trying to achieve this sort of change, to compel employers, by way of the contract, not to get into these activities that I think violate their governance responsibility. So, like, teachers in Hanover shouldn't have to work for an employer that's going to circumvent what their good governance role should be, which is to stay out of staff hiring, especially in such a clearly targeted way. Right? Like, I think people could use collective bargaining

agreements for this aim.

In January 2022, Bill 45 was proclaimed in Manitoba. The bill established centralised provincial collective bargaining for public school teachers in Manitoba, and the first province-wide collective agreement under the new centralized framework was ratified in August of 2024. The current collective agreement expires in June of 2026, meaning that there is an opportunity for Manitoba Teachers' Society to prioritize embedding protective language – as the interviewee describes above – into a new collective agreement during the upcoming bargaining process.

Consultation

Several questions in the interview guide focused on consultation: what mechanisms divisions have in place; what role do superintendents see consultation playing in policy development; and what professional experiences do individual interviewees have with consulting queer students and educators. The overall response from participants, when asked if they'd ever spoken to a queer staff member, student, or community member about their division's queer policy, or queer issues generally, was no. However, participants struggled to simply say 'no', instead offering lengthy but vague answers that eventually led to a 'no'. When asked about queer consultation, one superintendent responded: "That's a good question. I probably have and just don't... I don't think so. Not in terms of conversations about the policy or about [queer peoples'] experiences, you know, as somebody with that identity." Another participant shared:

I'm episodically thinking about stuff like [queer people's experience in our division]. I don't want to overstate it and say I'm thinking about it from time to time, I wonder about stuff like that. And then I either act on it or I don't. I guess if I felt an urgency about it, and you know, perhaps if there are changes, perhaps I would find a way to discreetly get some feedback if that's the right way to do it. I don't know.

A shared concern amongst participants was uncertainty regarding approaching queer members of staff to seek their input on queer policy. Said one superintendent:

I imagine myself like, hey, [queer staff member], I know you're gay. What do you think about our policy? It feels a bit awkward, right? It's like there's a part of me that thinks she would feel just like come on, [superintendent's name].

Participants shared that the power imbalance between themselves as superintendents and their teaching staff creates difficulty in approaching someone, particularly when the superintendent is not certain whether the staff member is queer, but instead just acting on an assumption. They also expressed being unsure how to formalize any kind of feedback mechanism for queer teachers without 'outing' or tokenizing staff members. One participant described the tension of reaching out to (possibly) queer staff as "trying to find the balance between respecting someone's privacy and not, like, demanding somebody be a spokesperson on the spot." Another participant reflected that they had never had a conversation with a queer staff member about their experiences in the division, but believed they were approachable to queer staff members. They shared:

I would hope I'm approachable enough. I have an open-door policy. I would hope that if any staff did have an issue with anything, that they would approach me and say, hey, this isn't right, or you need to be more inclusive of this or you need to, you need to add this, or... I would hope.

Another shared the specific challenges of reaching out to queer teachers in a rural division:

But again, like how I started off here, because it's such a small community ... Again, you have your suspicions, you think, okay, well, maybe you know, because someone says the word partner, you know like some people say husband, some people say spouse, some

people say partner... Like, I have this one teacher, and I'm pretty sure he has a partner, that, and he's gay, but he's never come out and told us. And so I don't want to infringe on his rights.

The participant went on to explain that part of the challenge in having meaningful and open dialogue with queer teachers is that, as a superintendent, they are not in schools, working alongside teachers:

Because, like, I'm not directly in the schools, maybe I have some staff that have been open like that [by coming out at work]. Like, I think there's one for sure. But I can't judge you on that. You know what I mean like I can't. I can't assume, but I wish he was comfortable enough to say, hey, this is me.

The questions around consultation often segued into superintendents sharing about their perspectives on the current safety and inclusivity of their divisions, particularly for queer staff. Surprisingly, multiple participants felt confident that their divisions were safe for queer staff to come out, and that there were no impediments to coming out and being out as a public school teacher in 2025, such as the quote shared above. Similarly, another superintendent shared:

For whatever it's worth, I get the impression from the one staff member that I'm thinking of... that it's like just not a thing. It's just not a thing that's thought about very much at this point... You know, based on how open everybody is, it just doesn't seem like there's anything deterring somebody from feeling comfortable and safe.

It's crucial to note that the superintendents shared these views immediately after confirming they had never directly spoken to a queer staff member about their experiences as a queer person in the division.

In terms of 2SLGBTQIA+ student feedback, participants again shared that there were few mechanisms, either formally or informally, in place in their divisions to collect information on queer students' experiences. One participant mentioned that their division had a student board liaison, but that 2SLGBTQIA+ issues were not explicitly put on their agenda. Another participant mentioned that their division rolled out the *OurSCHOOL Student Survey*, previously called the *Tell Them From Me Survey*, which to the best of their recollection contained a couple questions specific to 2SLGBTQIA+ student experience. One participant, when asked about their ideal professional development day to learn about 2SLGBTQIA+ issues, shared that they wanted to hear from queer staff and students:

Just listening. I think, like, if I had a day where I could listen to staff and students about what are the barriers, you know, what do they see?... If I followed around a [queer] student for a day, I think there would be things they would point out to me where I'd be like, I had no idea.

One interviewee who worked in a rural division shared that their only conversations with queer students about their experiences in school happened once students graduated, and came back to visit their hometowns. They said:

When I talked to the kids after they graduated, and when they finally came and admitted to what they wanted to be and I just said, well, what can I do better? What can we do better, so that kids in high school can feel comfortable doing that? So they would tell me, and so we – I – try to do those things for the kids.

Overall, interviewees painted a bleak picture of the role of queer consultation in queer-focused policy development. None of the participants I spoke to could point to a single instance of having a direct conversation with a queer student or staff member about their divisional policies on

queerness. The phrase “nothing about us without us” – a slogan conveying that no policy should be decided without the fulsome participation of the group or groups the policy will impact – came to mind repeatedly as I listened to participant responses around consultation. Until queer voices are centered in divisional decision-making around queer-focused policy, Manitoba schools will continue to fail queer students, staff, and community members.

Backlash

The final theme that emerged from the interview data that I will highlight is backlash. All five participants mentioned backlash at least once during their interviews, with several participants repeatedly bringing up their concerns around repercussions to queer-focused policy and programming initiatives. One superintendent, reflecting on potentially updating their division’s queer policies – and specifically on how loudly the division would share these updates with the wider community – said:

I can imagine somebody being of the opinion that that’s very courageous. And while that may be true, what it’s likely to yield is also some amount of really gross blowback from those dark corners of our communities; whose voices may threaten the psychological safety or otherwise of the students and staff among us who are vulnerable to that... It’s like, you want to check in on people, but you don’t want to, you know, go around shining a flashlight.

Another superintendent expressed their trepidation with the political volatility of queer issues, and suggested that finding ‘balance’ was an effective (and, they made sure to mention, non-cowardly) path to successful queer policy:

I think you would always have the responsibility to think, depending on your context, of balance. I don’t know if people would think there’s, like, cowardice in this. But I’m

thinking of it quite differently. Like, you can hold a very firm line and be clear about the beliefs that your policy represents and the actions that it supports and doesn't. But there's also a place where you can decide how loud you're going to be about that... Some of which might be at the expense and safety of the very people that you are intending to protect.

Put more succinctly by another interviewee: "I don't know if I would be in a big hurry to be super public about [queer policy changes] in my division."

One superintendent shared that a barrier to improving their division's queer-focused policies was a lack of clear process around policy development and rollout, which created fear for that superintendent of a policy update 'going nuclear':

If we are going to have equity or different Administrative Procedures around these topics, we really need to make sure we have a clear process about how they get unpacked and build that capacity in the division, versus that big fathead in the division office, putting something on the website that nobody knows is there until it goes nuclear.

The general belief that things are going well for queer people in public education, highlighted extensively in the *Ignorance* section earlier in this chapter, recurred when the topic of backlash came up in interviews. One superintendent shared how this belief fueled their reluctance to update queer policy:

It's something in my mind that's like, is this gonna make the circumstance better? If it isn't, and at the same time it's going to rile up a bunch of nastiness that people have to live with, then, like, why did I do that? Maybe the equivalent is like, you don't want to out people in your life or your workplace who don't want to be out. Maybe it's a similar thing on a macro level. It's like, why did you invite this trouble? Everything was fine.

Another superintendent echoed this belief that the public education system is currently working well for queer people, and that any attempts to improve the system would detract from its current success as an inclusive system:

Sometimes I feel like, okay, if we're going to create this special policy, then that's just going to target people to come and say, well, why aren't you doing this, and this?

Whereas if we, if everybody does what they're supposed to do, then there really shouldn't be any issues.

Several interviewees shared that they witnessed a rise in anti-queer rhetoric post-pandemic, fueled by a coalition of right-wing activism that gained strength and organizing power during the pandemic. Said one superintendent:

Prior to the pandemic, those [anti-queer] thoughts and belief systems were there. They were like undertones, but they weren't front and centre in conversations. And then through the pandemic, through sort of anti-mask and all of that rising to the top, it also allowed those conversations to rise to the top... Sort of started off with anti-mask, anti-government, but then turned into [anti-queerness] conversations that rose to the top.

Superintendents also mentioned backlash in their divisions in the form of families opting to remove their students from the division in response to queer-inclusive programming:

We did have, like, 2 or 3 families leave the division because they didn't believe in the Pride Walk... they left our division and they went to a private school because they felt the private school wouldn't promote this 'bad behaviour.'

Finally, multiple interviewees expressed concern that the broader political climate in North America, as well as globally, will only further galvanize anti-queer voices to influence Manitoba's public school system. One superintendent shared:

I know people in the [2SLGBTQIA+] community, they are struggling with everything going on. I just feel like when I watch the news and stuff, especially in the States, they're just always being attacked. I said to my [spouse] when Trump was going all this stuff, I said, I feel like they're gonna end up in Gilead, in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

More than around any other theme mentioned in this chapter, conversations around backlash brought out strong, evocative language from participants. Several mentioned the words 'courage' and 'cowardice.' The longest moments of silence, where a superintendent paused before responding, or stopped mid-way through an answer before continuing, happened while discussing backlash. I cannot characterize these silences, other than to say that superintendents seemed more uncomfortable speaking about how backlash influenced their divisions' policy choices than any other topic we covered during the interview.

Summary

In this chapter, I began with a brief discussion of the recruitment process, followed by an overview of participant selection. I then reviewed the participant pool for the research project. Next, I described my coding process. Finally, I shared the six main themes that emerged from the data: ignorance; perceived competing human rights and religion; school boards; external leadership vacuum; consultation; and backlash. Next, in Chapter 5, I will provide analysis of this data.

Chapter 5: Analysis

Introduction

This chapter begins with an expanded discussion of my positionality as the researcher of this project. Next is an overview of the project's data set, research questions, and theoretical frameworks. Then, I share my analysis of the data, organized into the following categories: ignorance and group membership; ignorance as political strategy; schools, prisons, and opportunities worth wanting; policy in the shadow of misinformation; anticipatory compliance; authority and constrained discourse; and policy momentum. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

A Further Note on Positionality

I detailed my positionality in Chapter 3 of this thesis. However, it is necessary to preface this chapter with two additional notes regarding my positionality in order to clarify my relation to the data analysis I will share in this chapter.

Firstly: I am a willing and consenting employee of Manitoba's public school system. I was a student in this system, a queer student, and I felt the homophobia, and I still decided to re-enter the system that hurt me, to work *within* it and *for* it. I told myself I entered this system to change it, to make it better. The superintendents I interviewed for this research project all expressed a similar view. They explained that they viewed leadership as a way to make positive change in an imperfect system. Yet I am harassed by questions that apply to both myself and them. Are we changing the system, or is the system changing us? And is the system changing the system?

The salary I receive for participating in this harm-causing system is how I shelter myself, how I feed myself, the reason I live the comfortable life I do. This research project, in which I

am studying the harm this system perpetuates, will further cement my place in the harm-perpetuating system. It will provide me with a higher salary through a higher qualification ranking on the provincial teacher compensation scale, and with yet more incentive to stay. I continue to learn about the racism and transphobia and ableism and myriads of other ways in which our province's public school system causes harm and upholds oppressive societal infrastructures, and still I have chosen to stay.

I know that being a person in a society means making compromise; I would like to think that if there was a different, better public education system in this province, I would go work for that one. Maybe I've acclimated to the hypocrisy of being a queer person willingly participating in an anti-queer system so I can sleep at night. Maybe my privilege – my whiteness, my non-transness – has groomed me into an occasionally obliging bystander of injustice upon not just others' communities but also my own. Regardless of the reasoning behind it, I am frustrated and bewildered by the ease with which I exist in this system which I know causes profound harm.

The purpose of me sharing this element of my positionality is to make clear my complicity in the harm that the public education system proliferates. Though my research participants have benefitted from a harm-perpetuating system, so have I. Though the data and subsequent analysis reveal a plethora of ways in which superintendents demonstrate comfort with a public education system rooted in injustice, so have I. There is no higher moral ground from which I conduct this analysis. This is crucial for you, the reader, to understand.

Secondly, I want to reiterate my positionality as a cisgender person, and acknowledge the longstanding history of non-trans queer people mobilizing trans activism and suffering to advocate for cisgender-exclusive queer rights. Dianna Boileau, a Manitoban transgender woman, first began presenting outwardly as female in her teens. She was arrested at 17 while on a trip to

Winnipeg for dressing in woman's attire, which resulted in her being outed to her parents.

Boileau's parents eventually accepted her identity, and she worked as a model and stenographer.

In 1962, Boileau was involved in a fatal car accident, and charged with dangerous driving and criminal negligence (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1972). Boileau was ultimately acquitted, but her trial became a media spectacle, with sensational, transphobic press coverage – “Dressed as Woman, Man Goes on Trial” wrote one headline (Daubs, 2016) – leading Boileau to attempt suicide. Despite the media scrutiny, Boileau later published a book detailing her experiences and advocating for queer people's acceptance in modern society.

Sylvia Rivera, a transgender activist and key figure in the 1969 Stonewall Riots, often called out non-trans members of the queer community for their lack of support. Four years after Stonewall, she gave a speech, now titled *Y'all Better Quiet Down*, where she was heckled so aggressively by cisgender queer people that she quit activism for two years (Uglow, 2024). In a speech one year before her death in 2002, Sylvia described to a group of gay men the outcome of the Stonewall Riots she helped lead: “You have acquired your liberation, your freedom, from that night; myself, I've got shit, just like I had back then” (Abi-Karam & Gabriel, 2020, p. 383). She described being in a group of 2SLGBTQIA+ activists singing *We Shall Overcome* at a protest, saying, “I remember singing but I haven't overcome a dam thing. I'm not even in the back of the bus. [The trans community] is being pulled by a rope around our neck by the bumper of the damn bus” (Abi-Karam & Gabriel, 2020, p. 384). Transgender rights have always been a political wedge issue, and the cisgender queer community has a long history of weaponizing the reality that non-trans people are perceived as more palatable – and therefore less dangerous to non-queer society – than trans people.

As detailed in Chapter One, the focus of this research project was driven by my experiences with systemic homophobia within the public school system. However, the recent policy changes around student names and pronouns in Saskatchewan, Alberta, and New Brunswick, as well as the anti-queer rhetoric rising across Canada specifically target transgender and non-binary students (Khonina, 2024). These policies and conversations promote misgendering and deadnaming, exacerbate existing health inequalities, and put student lives at risk; a 2024 U.S.-based study found that enacting anti-trans laws increased suicide attempts among trans and non-binary youth by up to 72% (Lee et al., 2024).

As a cisgender person, I am at far less risk of harm through anti-queer policy and law than trans people are. While my identity as a queer person informs my role as a researcher of queer policy, many of the current policy changes in public education target trans people specifically, and that is neither an identity I hold nor an experience to which I can speak. However, it is my intention that this research project engages with the message Sylvia Rivera reiterated throughout her lifetime; that it is the responsibility of cisgender queer people to use our privilege to fight for the liberation and freedom of trans people, just as trans people have consistently fought for the entire 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Overview of Data Set, Research Questions & Theoretical Framework

For this research project, five standalone semi-structured interviews were conducted with current Manitoba public school division superintendents. Interviews were conducted either in-person or via UMZoom, and each lasted approximately one hour.

As a reminder to readers before analysing the research data, this study's central research question is: What factors (sociopolitical, institutional, and personal) might explain Manitoba superintendents'

decision-making in reviewing, revising, creating, and/or leaving unchanged divisional policy documents relating to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues?

This study's sub-questions are:

1. How do Manitoba superintendents navigate and make sense of their processes of interaction with their divisions' 2SLGBTQIA+ administrative procedures and policy documents, including catalyst events, queer consultation, and policy rollout?
2. How do Manitoba superintendents make sense of and interact with the intent, content, and impact of the current 2SLGBTQIA+ administrative procedures and policies in their divisions?

This research mobilizes two theoretical frameworks: a queer democratic framework, and a policy momentum framework. The queer democratic framework (QDF), proposed by Leonardi and Moses (2021), brings together elements of both queer and liberal democratic theories. The QDF acts as a conceptual bridge between the two theories, and is intended to be applied to policy analysis and implementation. Policy momentum is a theoretical framework created by Nicole McMahon which proposes four mechanisms of policy diffusion (coercion, competition, learning, and emulation/mimicry) and asserts that this diffusion can happen horizontally or vertically (either across structurally equivalent jurisdictions or from upper levels of governance down or lower levels of governance up).

Ignorance

As detailed in Chapter 4, one of the prevailing themes that emerged from the data was ignorance. Superintendents lacked the basic vocabulary necessary to discuss queer issues, referenced disproven beliefs about queer existence, and several of them argued that queer students and educators do not face homophobia or transphobia, while simultaneously noting that

in their roles as superintendents they regularly deal homophobic and/or transphobic activism in their school divisions. In the following sections, I will analyze what the theme of ignorance might reveal when mobilized by queer democratic theory and a policy momentum framework.

Ignorance and Group Membership

Leonardi and Moses (2021) write that developing a queer democratic framework (QDF) requires focusing on three key ideas, the first of which is that identity is inherently unstable, it is inherently intersectional, and that group membership is politically necessary but must be understood as incapable of offering a complete representation of an individual. If policymakers see group membership identity labels as stable, fulsome descriptors of individuals, policies intended to increase opportunities and success for historically marginalized groups may do more harm than good (Leonardi & Moses, 2017). As Butler (1993) reminds us, “to prescribe an exclusive identification for a multiply constituted subject, as every subject is, is to enforce a reduction and a paralysis” (p. 116). A queer democratic framework calls on policymakers to consider and complicate notions of ‘normal’ and ‘Other,’ and to see the identity as personal, relational, and political (Leonardi & Moses, 2021). Further, Butler (1990) points out that it is impossible to refuse representational politics, as “the juridical structures of language and politics constitute the contemporary field of power” (p. 8). Instead, she writes that a minority group must understand how the lexical categories into which it has been relegated are “produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” (Butler, p. 5). Interrogating the lexical categories to which queer students have been relegated by superintendents can help inform understanding of superintendent decision-making on queer policy.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, the superintendents I interviewed struggled with the basic vernacular of queerness. One interviewee asked me if it they were still allowed to use the word ‘gay’. Only one of the five superintendents used an acronym consistently through the hour-long interview to describe the queer community; the rest all either did not attempt an acronym, or attempted it and then fell back on phrases such as “members of that community” or “people who identify in a non-traditional way” for the remainder of their interviews. One possible explanation for this knowledge gap is the workload of a superintendency; both interview data and the literature review identified that superintendents consistently report their workloads as unsustainable and limiting their ability to enact systemic change. Another possible explanation the lack of queer language demonstrated by participants is a lack of professional development, either mandated or elective; only one of the five participants had participated in queer-focussed professional development, and the superintendent had independently sought it out. Yet another potential explanation for the superintendent knowledge gap is discomfort. Britzman (1998) suggests that the major barrier to learning is not the topic content, but rather the disruption of what we think we already know. Superintendents do not come to conversations about queerness as blank slates; they come with opinions and assumptions rooted in a lifetime of absorbing information from the environments around them about queerness. To address their current lack of knowledge on queer vernacular and experience would not just involve learning more; it would likely also involve challenging some of their current beliefs and understandings around queerness. That process – of challenging their current queer knowledge in order to build a stronger understanding of the lives and experiences of queer people – would likely produce discomfort. Their current ignorance might, therefore, stem from an avoidance of the inherent discomfort of that learning process.

The QDF's invitation to examine whether policymakers understand group membership and identity as unstable and intersectional presents a challenge, as the superintendents I interviewed were largely unable to demonstrate an understanding of queer group membership and identity *in any way*. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler writes that representation is understood as a political process that extends visibility and legitimacy to a minority group. Representation is "the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true" (Butler, 1990, p. 1) about that group. The subjects of this research project did not have language to articulate what queer group membership means to them, let alone whether or not they understand that group membership to be politically necessary but permanently incomplete.

However, rather than an analytical impasse, it is possible this absence of language presents instead a key finding, as the conspicuous, gaping hole where a queer lexicon should exist in the vocabulary of superintendents invites further questions. As discussed above, is possible that superintendent's knowledge gap on queer issues stems from an unconscious or non-deliberate source: workloads, lack of professional development, or unconscious avoidance of discomfort. Yet it is also possible that the knowledge gap demonstrated by participants is at least partially deliberate. The superintendency is a political role; individuals must oversee large workforces, act as liaisons between community stakeholders, express and advocate for their beliefs to elected officials, and act as spokespeople for the division to media outlets, among other tasks. A further potential explanation, therefore, of the staggering void of language displayed by superintendents when discussing queerness is that their ignorance is politically motivated.

Ignorance as Political Strategy

Ignorance is not merely the absence of knowledge but a socially organized and institutionally productive force that boundaries what can be known, said, and acted upon (Foucault, 1975; Mills, 2007; Sedgwick, 1990). The interview data of this project reveals that superintendents are ignorant of the language necessary to describe queer communities, as well as the lived experiences of queer people. The central question of this research project asks what factors (sociopolitical, institutional, and personal) might explain superintendents' decision-making around 2SLGBTQIA+ policy. One possibility is that superintendents' ignorance functions as an actively constructed political strategy.

The act of remaining unable to speak about the queer community due to lack of language may be an unconscious decision on the part of superintendents – less a decision *not* to learn and more so a failure to make the decision *to* learn – but it is nonetheless a decision. How else could superintendents genuinely believe that today's public school students don't experience homophobia and transphobia, as one interviewee suggested, or that there are no factors prohibiting a queer teacher from coming out in the workplace, as another interviewee argued? The profound cognitive dissonance required to hold such beliefs in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary demands the question: what individuals or systems benefit from that ignorance?

While superintendents would likely adamantly reject the suggestion that their not-knowing is a substantive epistemic practice (Mills, 2007), their ignorance is politically useful to the institutions in which they operate. The upholding of cis-hetero patriarchy, like the upholding of any dominant power structure, is preferred by the institution in which it operates; strategic ignorance preserves power for the powerful (Bailey, 2007). Institutions maintain gender and

sexuality norms because power structures depend on those norms. Those who exist as marginalized within these power structures must not be permitted to identify their mistreatment, must not be permitted to name and display the injustice of their institution, or the power structures risk toppling. Status quo – what Butler calls *norms* – is the fuel that thrusts a power structure through the present and into the future, unscathed.

Queerness demands an alternative innovation from queer people; it invites us to ask if the current world is enough for us – kind enough, creative enough, expansive enough (Vuong, 2019). Queerness exists for queer (and non-queer) people “as an ideality... a structure and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present” (Munoz, 2009, p. 1). To be queer (and/or to think queerly) is to demand *more* of the systems in which you operate. This poses a clear threat to those atop power structures, and in turn offers a rationale for superintendents’ epistemic avoidance on queer topics. Cisheteropatriarchy in public education preserves the current social order – and therefore the existing hierarchies. System leaders, like superintendents, sit in the middle of this conflict between queerness and status quo. To align with queerness – to go in search of more knowledge and beat back the ignorance the system of education would prefer they hold – is to place in peril the very power structure that assigns them leadership.

Further, even superintendents who possess some base knowledge of queer communities and identities face an uphill battle in moving towards a more equitable public education system. Policies typically reproduce existing norms in institutions. “Institutions are oriented around some bodies more than others [...] they take the shape of what they tend to accommodate,” writes Ahmed (2012, p. 23). Put another way, institutions are straightening devices. They offer representation, inclusion, and comfort to the bodies they are oriented towards; privileged bodies.

Straight bodies, cisgender bodies. The public school system, as an institution, is designed to make queer-inclusive policy harder to create, justify, and effectively implement, because it is not designed with queer bodies as the centre, but with non-queer ones.

When asked to name the most important factors in creating and implementing high-quality policy, interviewees named collaboration, communication, and negotiation as crucial skills for a superintendent to possess. When pressed about whether holding some base knowledge about 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals might be useful when crafting queer-focused policy, interviewees agreed that knowledge would be a useful, but not necessary, tool. They suggested that collaboration and consultation with queer voices could provide them with the knowledge needed to write and put forward the best policy possible. (Notably, only one of the five superintendents could name how they would access that queer consultation, and not a single interviewee had ever had a conversation with a queer colleague about their division's queer policies.)

Superintendents may not see their ignorance on queer identities and topics as hindering their capacity to create effective queer-focused policies, but the system in which they operate is preset to privilege cisheteropatriarchy. As policy writers, superintendents navigate normative expectations such as public opinion, community values, and political climate. Power operates not just through law and policy, but also through the reproduction of norms, which govern how we understand ourselves (Rose, 1999). These norms shape policy far before the policy is ever written. The ignorance of basic 2SLGBTQIA+ identities and experiences displayed by the interviewees is not a neutral element; it is a deficit. Understanding basic terminology and statistics about queer students is not an optional add-on to a superintendent's skill set, it is a critical requirement. To frame such profound non-knowing as that displayed by interviewees as

simple ignorance is harm-causing: “It is the innocence which constitutes the crime,” Baldwin (1963, p. 62) reminds us. For superintendents to write queer policy – let alone to write effective, durable policy – they must go up against the institution of public education, in all its formidable, equity-trampling propensity, and win. To succeed as an individual against a system (which is to say, to beat the odds) requires skill and determination, but it also requires *knowledge*.

A further challenge here is that the superintendents I interviewed viewed their ignorance, and resulting silence, as non-decisions. They are not advocating for anti-queerness, they said; they are simply not speaking against it. They are not policy-making in opposition to queerness; they are simply not making new policy about queerness. “I [...] behold in anger and agony the eagerness of the world to throw piles of shit on those of us who want to savage or simply cannot help but savage the norms that so desperately need savaging,” writes Maggie Nelson (2015, p. 32). None of the superintendents I interviewed named their ignorance as harmful. It was described as unfortunate, as a growth item, and as an area for improvement moving forward. It was not described as a pile of shit being thrown at queer people. One wonders if, framed this way for superintendents, they might find more urgency with which to chip away at their collective epistemic avoidance on the subject.

Ignorance, like knowledge, is proliferative (Sedgwick, 1990). It trickles down systems, gaining speed along the way; what is (deliberately) unknown by those in power becomes (unwittingly) unknown by the many more who exist within the system. This unknowing becomes silence, and queerness is quarantined into the category of unspeakable. Interviewees described with self-admitted confusion the lack of discussions about queerness at upper leadership meetings and with school boards. They seemed genuinely stumped when asked why, with so much anti-queer pressure coming from the larger community, nobody in their divisional

leadership structure wanted to talk about the experiences of queer students, much less write policy about it. “Norms decide who will count as a subject and whose lives will count as lives” (Butler, 2004). The epistemic avoidance of superintendents means queer students’ needs are not addressed in policy, their identities and group memberships are left unspoken by their leaders, and hateful voices of opposition in the community are left unchallenged. Eve Sedgwick (1990) writes, “For many gay adults, the formative experience of childhood was that of being a child who could not name what they were” (p. 3). The result of the norms reproduced by the Manitoba public school system – through policy written by leaders whose ignorance renders them incapable even of cobbling together an acronym by which to refer to a community of students they are mandated to protect – is a culture in which queer children are unintelligible to themselves.

Schools, Prisons, and Opportunities Worth Wanting

Canadian compulsory school laws dictate that Canadian children are required to attend school from age 6 until they are either 16 or 18, depending on their home province or territory (Oreopoulos, 2005). While schools are not carceral institutions, they share with these institutions the central fact that their attendees are legally compelled to be present. A student may in some cases have the option of *which* school to attend, but the fact remains that a student does not have the legal right to not attend at all. Education systems have, from the get-go, a legally sanctioned power over students. From the first day of a child’s life as a student in school, it is understood that the relationship between school and student is not consensual; a school can choose to remove a student – via suspension or expulsion – but a student cannot choose to remove themselves from a school unless they are committing to attend a different one, in which the power dynamic between student and school will be identical.

The parallels between a school and a prison are not as far-fetched as Canada's liberal democratic society might prefer to believe. As a result, examining the impacts of superintendents' ignorance through the lens of Foucault's work on discipline and punishment offers a relevant interpretation of how ignorance is mobilized in the public school system to perpetuate the harm of queer students.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) writes: "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (p. 170). The power of discipline is not overt, but instead in its modesty it operates as a calculated and permanent economy to assign and remove value from individuals (Foucault, 1977). The most effective tools of disciplinary power? Hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement, and the combination of these two elements into a *normalizing gaze*; a surveillance over individuals in order to qualify, classify, and punish (Foucault, 1977). As with mandating attendance at an institution, here again we note the parallels between schools and prisons; students are placed under a normalizing gaze by the behavioural and social expectations of their school, norms established by the leaders in each school building, who in turn report to superintendents whose role is to establish behavioural and social norms across a school division.

For example, one interviewee who worked in a rural school division mentioned not knowing a single out 2SLGBTQIA+ teacher in their divisional staff. When pressed about the effects of that void on students – either that the division has no queer teachers, or that the teachers do not feel safe to come out in their workplaces – the superintendent shared that they had not reflected on the impact it might have. Further, the superintendent could also not name any steps they believed they could take to support queer students by improving the presence and visibility of 2SLGBTQIA+ teachers. The superintendent, by not engaging with the issue of

visible queerness in their division, sustained a norm of visibility in their division, a norm that upheld the belief that queerness should be withheld from professional spaces. This normalizing gaze, which carries the message that queerness ought to be sequestered and withheld from public spaces, is then imposed upon students, who have no choice but to go to school and therefore attempt to exist under these conditions of suppression.

The question of the role of agency and deliberate intent behind superintendent decisions is explored in earlier sections of this chapter. Relevant to this section is the acknowledgment that superintendents' ignorance prohibits them from speaking, acting, and politicking on behalf of queer students' rights to continually define, undefine, and redefine themselves, superintendents are – regardless of intentionality – the deployers of normalizing gaze under which queer students continue to be qualified, classified and punished for falling outside the norms of a deliberately uninterrogated cis-heteropatriarchal public education system.

The connections between educational and carceral institutions continue: Foucault (1977) notes that the power to punish is not essentially different than the power to educate, and that the right to punish has shifted “from the vengeance of the sovereign to the defence of society” (p. 90). *The defence of society* jumps out as an unexpectedly modern phrase in Foucault's half-century old text, one that could just as easily be found on the poster of a protestor at a MillionMarch4Kids event or on the t-shirt of a pro-book banning speaker at a school board meeting.

The second key idea of a queer democratic framework (QDF) is that educational opportunities must be grounded in the principles of equality, fairness, and justice (Leonardi & Moses, 2021). By exploring how these principles play out through related queer conceptions of autonomy and recognition, the QDF aims to interrogate the way liberal education policies have

historically interpreted equality in ways that perpetuate the status quo. In turn, the QDF offers a justice-forward approach to creating and implementing equity-focused policy. In the QDF, *equality* of opportunity for students is considered through a queered conception of what participation means in education that focuses on autonomy: students must have opportunities worth wanting, and they must be able to take advantage of those opportunities without exacting penalties or costs (Leonardi & Moses, 2021).

To deliver on the promise of schools as places of equal educational opportunity, with autonomy as the primary goal, the QDF asserts that “we have to think of schools – not as places in which all students should integrate into normative standards, but as places that seek to challenge and rework social and institutional standards” (Leonardi & Moses, 2021, p. 13). It is only then that we will succeed in making schools places that can transform and nurture possibilities for all students.

Here lies a crucial connection between the QDF and Foucault’s work on punishment. If schools are, as the QDF asserts, “places in which all students should integrate into normative standards” (Leonardi & Moses, 2021, p. 13), that is precisely the *normalizing gaze* Foucault (1977) describes as powering the surveillance over individuals in order to qualify, classify, and punish. Multiple interviewees described noticing that students in their divisions would wait to come out as members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community until they were out of the public school system, particularly in rural divisions. One superintendent, when pressed as to why students were unable to come out while still in the system, suggested that students (especially rural ones) lacked the lived examples of other queer people around them to guide their coming out process; another said they believed that students knew that their lives in school would be more difficult if they were openly queer, so they waited until they no longer had to be in the system to come out.

These examples demonstrate a clear lack of opportunities worth wanting for students; the version of schooling they would receive (and, indeed, the life they would receive) if they came out was so unattractive, they chose to conceal and repress their identity until they could be free of the public schooling system.

If there are no opportunities worth wanting for queer students, that is punishment. If there are penalties or costs to queer students for accessing opportunities worth wanting – such as poor treatment at school, the institution they are mandated to attend, if they choose to come out – that is punishment. “There is no power relation with the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge,” writes Foucault (1977, p. 27). The normalizing gaze, which reinforces cis-heteropatriarchy in public schools (institutions which children are compelled by law to attend) is upheld by the ignorance of superintendents, and it punishes queer students.

Policy in the Shadow of Misinformation

One of the themes identified in the data was *religion and perceived competing rights*. Education has always been a site of conflict over notions of value; whose beliefs are worth more, whose freedoms are worth more, and indeed whose children are worth more (Apple, 1993). Throughout the interviews, superintendents described how much of the anti-queer activism taking place in their divisions was spearheaded by individuals or groups who expressed opposition to queer inclusion in schools on religious grounds. These voices of opposition often justified their anti-queerness as an exertion of their legal rights; religious, parental, or both. Such individuals erroneously viewed the inclusion of queer content in Manitoba public curriculum, as well as inclusive programming such as Pride Walks, as actions that violated their rights as parents, as members of a faith group, or both. Superintendents described trying to communicate with these individuals and groups as participating in frustrating, sometimes even as futile;

conversations where both sides knew the other was not going to change their beliefs or actions moving forward.

McGill (2016) uses the term *inter-rights conflict* to describe the tension emerging from “a conflict that involves two or more different rights or freedoms belonging to individual rights-holders set in opposition to one another” (p. 587). However, as repeatedly mentioned earlier in this thesis, the ‘parental rights’ movement is legally baseless, as ‘parental rights’ are not mentioned in The Canadian Charter for Rights and Freedoms. Similarly, simply claiming one’s religious rights have been infringed without objectively established burdens on Charter rights is insufficient to halt the passage of new laws to protect 2SLGBTQIA+ rights, or the implementation of already-established ones. While Manitoba public school superintendents describe facing sustained criticism and opposition from parents and community members over 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion, the frequency of the ‘parental rights’ or religious freedoms arguments being put before superintendents does not change the central fact that it has no legal standing.

An incorrect statement, no matter how many times repeated, remains incorrect. However, while the truth of a claim cannot be altered, its ideological power can grow through repetition. This repetition and subsequent belief of untrue or unproven statements is known as *the illusory truth effect*; a cognitive bias that leads people to believe information is true simply because they have heard it repeated many times, rather than due to its veracity. “Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint,” writes Foucault (1977, p. 27). A claim can be assigned validity – what Foucault (1977) suggests is what we mean when we say *truth* – by power structures, rather than objective correctness. Discourse produces this *truth* through both in-person and online interactions (consider the algorithmic advantages given to click-traffic-producing topics like “there are litter boxes at my kid’s school!”). The result is the

conversational quagmire superintendents described repeatedly during interviews; conversations where the parent believes they are in possession of the ultimate truth about what does and does not occur in public schools. How can one teacher, principal, or superintendent possibly undo a parent's belief in the vast, proliferative, algorithmically-fuelled *truth* about litter boxes in schools?

This research project focuses on superintendent decision-making on queer policy, and therefore offers no commentary this tangential issue of the escalating impact of misinformation on the treatment of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. I leave these topics to other researchers to address, and will limit my commentary to the dual reminder from James Baldwin that “ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have” (1972, p. 149) and that “the victim who is able to articulate the situation of the victim has ceased to be a victim: [they have] become a threat” (1976, p. 18).

All five superintendents made reference during the interviews to the power of social amplification through repetition while explaining their interactions with the public around queer-focused educational initiatives in their division. Several mentioned the internet, namely social media, as particularly damaging due to the speed with which a falsehood can be reproduced and replicated within an online – and subsequently, a real-life – community. However, it is worth questioning whether or not social amplification through repetition is the only force at play when considering how demonstrably false information becomes widely believed by a segment of the population.

McMahon's (2023) policy momentum theory defines policy momentum as an accumulation of pressure from two levels of influence, which in turn can generate policy change at a third level. It names five intervening mechanisms which can increase or decrease the

likelihood of policy momentum generating change: public opinion; media attention; government ideology; political and non-political events; and knowledge networks (McMahon, 2023). Below, I will examine misinformation through the lens of these five intervening mechanisms to examine whether they were mobilized to cultivate or perpetuate misinformation around current 2SLGBTQIA+ policy in Manitoba public schools.

Superintendents shared that they felt some parents were repeating language and ideas coming from the Trump administration in the U.S. or from far-right Canadian politicians. Interviewees suggested that these parents had perhaps always held anti-queer views, but didn't feel empowered to reach out to divisional administrators and voice those opinions until hearing high-profile politicians voice them. The frequency and intensity of superintendents' conversations with parents and other community stakeholders increased significantly as anti-queer rhetoric gained mainstream status through its repetition by high-profile political figures. This data demonstrates government ideology, media attention, and public opinion as intervening mechanisms at work in amplifying anti-queer voices and views unbacked by evidence.

As mentioned in Chapter One of this thesis, since 2023, New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, and Alberta's provincial governments have all implemented new pronoun policies in their education systems which decrease 2SLGBTQIA+ students' privacy and right to self-identify. While these changes were working their way through their respective governments, anti-queer activism targeting public education was rapidly mobilized across Canada. Events such as the "1 Million March 4 Children" drew large crowds who demonstrated in front of government buildings, including one at the Manitoba Legislature on September 20th (Gareau, 2023) and one on October 21st at Winnipeg City Hall (Holyk, 2023). These events often included posters and media interviews where people shared their false beliefs around what public education does and

doesn't do; indoctrinating children to change their pronouns or to take hormone replacement therapy, for example, were cited by attendees as true outcomes of the public education system (Hoye, 2023), despite there being no evidence to support them.

Interviewees shared that, following the media coverage around the government proposals and implementations of these policies, as well as the anti-queer activism receiving a high media profile, they noticed an increase in the amount of communication they received from parents around the topic of 2SLGBTQIA+ education policy. Interviewees described parents who reached out to them, upset that Manitoba's policies were not changing to ideologically align more with those recently changed in other provinces. Several interviewees also mentioned receiving communication from parents who were concerned about the potential for the recent policy changes in other provinces to activate a similar policy shift in Manitoba. However, the most direct impact of the media coverage on superintendents was an increase in the volume of communication with parents that one superintendent described as *educating* conversations; discussions where the superintendent was trying to persuade the parent that their child was not, in fact, being harmed or having their rights violated by the current queer-focused policies in place in their division. This interview data from superintendents again suggests that multiple intervening mechanisms of policy momentum theory – namely, media attention, and political and non-political events – impacted public ignorance and the perpetuation of false information around 2SLGBTQIA+ policy in Manitoba public schools.

Policy Discourse Boundaries

The third key idea of the Leonardi and Moses's (2021) queer democratic framework (QDF) emphasizes the relationship between theory, policy, and practice. Leonardi and Moses (2021) argue that queer theory's focus on discourse and textual analysis to understand how

power functions in social and political systems produces theoretically rich discussion, but sometimes lacks the pragmatism and direct applicability to the challenges presented in everyday life. Their proposed solution is the QDF's attention to policy assumptions as they play out in practice. Leonardi and Moses (2021) argue that focusing on *on-the-ground* policy outcomes offers equity-oriented initiatives a higher chance of success. In the context of this thesis, the third principle of the QDF offers a useful lens through which to examine the on-the-ground experiences of superintendents as they navigate the various ways in which queer policy discourse boundaries are established and upheld in the Manitoba public education system.

Anticipatory Compliance

One possible explanation for the current climate of ignorance and silence that boundaries queer policy discourse is that superintendents are exhibiting anticipatory compliance to societal norms of cisheteropatriarchy. Chomsky (1988; 1989; 2002) argues that compliance is internalized rather than imposed, anticipated rather than forced, and that censorship is usually self-censorship. In the context of superintendents maintaining ignorance on queer issues and rarely discussing or updating queer policy, Chomsky's assertion that compliance is taken up almost entirely by the individual rather than imposed by the system invites further questions. Is it possible that superintendents are both unconsciously maintaining ignorance on queer issues (as explored in earlier sections of this chapter) *and* unconsciously upholding the cramped boundaries of queer policy discourse, to the detriment of queer policy and, subsequently, queer students? What would it look like to bring these unconscious actions into the realm of the deliberate for superintendents? Professional development opportunities? More robust equity hiring practices in the school boards hiring superintendents? Another quarter-century of educational research

demonstrating that 2SLGBTQIA+ students suffer mightily in our current public education system?

Ultimately, I am led to wonder if it even matters whether superintendents' actions are conscious or unconscious, since the third key idea of the QDF reminds us to focus our attention to the on-the-ground policy outcomes. In the case of superintendents, the permission to have vigorous debate seems unneeded to maintain obeisance. Interview data revealed that divisional leadership – superintendents and school boards alike – consistently avoided discussing queer issues, even when issues such as 50% absenteeism on a Pride Walk day or anti-inclusive education rallies were presenting. Chomsky (1998) suggests that the path to keeping people obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion on a topic, but allow vigorous debate within that spectrum. This spectrum of acceptable opinion boundaries not only what can be said, but also what remains unsaid – as Bourdieu (1977) notes, “The most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words” (p. 188).

When pressed, interviewees could not specify why those topics weren't brought up by a board member of themselves during meetings, except that a spectre of fear hung over the topic of 2SLGBTQIA+ issues at the divisional leadership level. “To speak about the problem is to become the problem,” notes Ahmed (2012, p. 26). One superintendent shared their belief that everyone at divisional leadership meetings was frightened of saying the wrong thing, or having something be taken out of context. Another shared that their board had members who were inclusive to queer students and members who weren't, and that everyone was aware of these ideological differences and managed the range of opinions by simply not discussing queerness at all. The QDF presses us to consider the policy outcomes of this structurally induced, reproductive compliance, as well as to imagine how policy outcomes could improve under a

policy-making infrastructure less beholden to anticipatory compliance and bounded discourse (Chomsky, 1998).

Authority and Constrained Discourse

As detailed in Chapter Four, one theme that emerged from the data was the presence of an *external leadership vacuum* for superintendents. Superintendents shared that they felt their oversight organizations – specifically Manitoba Association of School Superintendents (MASS), Manitoba School Boards Association (MSBA) and Manitoba’s Department of Education – were failing to adequately support school divisions and superintendents in navigating rising anti-queer rhetoric and address queer students’ needs.

Foucault (1972) argues that discourse is a regulated practice, and a practice of regulated statements. Leadership is not just decision-making; it is authorized speech. “The power of words [...] depends on the authority of the one who utters them,” writes Bourdieu (1991, p. 107). However, while superintendents are the highest authority in their school divisions, alongside their school board, there are individuals and organizations of higher authority (such as MASS, MSBA, and the Department of Education) who mold and permit what superintendents ultimately communicate to their staff, students, and communities. Interview data revealed that these higher authorities, in the superintendents’ view, failed to support school divisions in addressing 2SLGBTQIA+ policy needs. Policy-making is ultimately a struggle over ideas (Stone, 1988). One possible explanation for superintendent silence and ignorance on 2SLGBTQIA+ policy is that their overseeing bodies established silent constraints; unspoken but clearly communicated norms of what superintendents are even allowed to consider regarding queer policy.

Superintendents provided several examples of how overseeing organizations set these silent constraints, establishing rigid boundaries on any potential superintendent-led changes to

2SLGBTQIA+ policy. One superintendent shared that a recently proposed a resolution to MSBA for the association to create a code of conduct for school boards was not passed by the organization. The resolution was put forth in an attempt to give the superintendent more power to admonish trustees for using hate speech or making false claims, as currently the neither the superintendent or the collective board has a mechanism to shut down harmful presentations or discipline the board member involved. “What is left unproblematic [...] is often the most significant,” notes Bacchi (2009, p. 2). The failed MSBA resolution demonstrates how oversight bodies set discursive constraints on superintendents through not just what these oversight organizations say but what they *don’t* say. Further, a refusal to name prejudice and harm-causing behaviour by MSBA acted as a reaffirmation that MSBA believes superintendents should not have the power to shut down hateful behaviour and speech at school board meetings.

“Institutions are built from the actions they do not recognize,” writes Ahmed (2012, p 33). Silence is not neutral; deferral is not neutral; declining to implement a policy is a decision, just as much as implementing a policy is one. MSBA’s abstention to addressing hate speech by trustees in their policies therefore provides a data point; the policy void suggests hate speech may be seen as permissible by MSBA, or as an issue lacking the importance or relevance MSBA deems necessary to act. Either way, MSBA’s decision has broad implications for superintendent policy-making, as interviewees shared. Superintendents, when trying to improve their own divisional policy, are impacted by this precedent set by MSBA about what speech is acceptable in public education leadership, and by consequence what policies are (or aren’t) permitted to be put forward by educational leaders. Political systems are characterized by friction and resistance to change (Baugmartner & Jones, 1993). Institutional inertia in the face of emergent human rights concerns establishes a dominant discourse, one which individual leaders – in this case,

superintendents – must actively disrupt and subvert if they wish to make equitable, durable policy change.

A final example of an overseeing organization setting discourse boundaries on superintendent queer policy decision-making comes from the Province of Manitoba's Department of Education. Several interviewees expressed frustration at the province, sharing that the department is not doing enough to engage with queer students' needs by provincially mandating specific queer-focused policy for all school divisions. Four of the five interviewees named the 2017 provincial document *Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Manitoba School* as a practical, useful tool that their divisional leadership team regularly referenced to guide decision-making. However, aside from this document, interviewees shared that they generally either receive very low-quality, non-actionable documents from the province, or they receive no guidance whatsoever regarding queer-focused policy. This top-down silence suggests the mechanism of ignorance either starts from the top, or is upheld by those individuals and organizations at the top of education leadership structures.

Superintendents shared that they believed the Department of Education was deliberately avoiding providing clearer direction on the topic of 2SLGBTQIA+ issues in education because the provincial government deems it politically disadvantageous to weigh in publicly. As Lipsky writes, "Street-level bureaucrats [...] cope by developing routines that limit their uncertainty" (1908, p. 83). Interviewees viewed this as both a dereliction of duty by the department, as well as an unfair offloading of the political volatility of queer-focused policy onto the backs of school divisions and, by extension, superintendents. Drawing once again on the QDF's focus on the *on-the-ground* experiences that impact superintendents' policy choices, the Department of Education's retreat from its decision-making authority on the matter of queer policy not only

reiterates to superintendents the political unattractiveness of engaging with queer issues, but also models a version of education leadership in which advocating for queer students is both non-obligatory and ill-advised.

Here, an interesting superintendent blind spot emerges. Throughout their explanations of the various governing bodies that have failed to protect and guide them, superintendents did not speak to the ways in which their own policy decision-making mimics that of these bodies. None of the interviewees acknowledged their own complicity as decision-making leaders contributing to the crippling bounded discourse around queer-focused policy in Manitoba public education. Instead of accepting the risks (and rewards!) inherent to wading into public discussions on queer policy in public education, superintendents have mimicked the decision-making of the policymakers above them. It is notable that interviewees were confident to identify risk aversion in leadership when speaking about the Department of Education, MASS, and MSBA, but either unable or unwilling to name themselves as similarly participating in the choice to protect themselves from the political volatility of queer-focused policy-making. Individuals absorb the consequences of intuitional risk avoidance (Beck, 1986). In addition, risk avoidance around human rights by leaders also actively reinforces systemic harm, as it upholds dominant narratives: “Washing one’s hands of the conflict [...] means to side with the powerful” (Freire, 1970, p. 122). Avoiding the conversations, decisions, and policy-making necessary to meaningfully engage with the needs of 2SLGBTQIA+ students, superintendents place that labour – and the ongoing harm perpetuated by the silence that they offer in its place – upon those below them in the hierarchal structure of public education; teachers, students, and families.

Policy Momentum

The similarities at play between the queer policy decision-making of superintendents and that of their oversight organizations aligns strongly with the theory of policy-making put forward by McMahon's (2023) policy momentum framework. Unlike existing work on policy diffusion, which focuses primarily on domestic or international processes, policy momentum framework examines how combined pressure from different levels of governance create the conditions for policy change to occur (McMahon, 2023). Policy momentum, McMahon (2023) proposes, occurs when the vertical and horizontal pathways of diffusion (the four mechanisms of which are: coercion, competition, emulation/mimicry, and learning) are simultaneously occurring at different levels, above and below the site of analysis. In the context of examining superintendent discourse around queer policy-making, the policy momentum framework provides a valuable lens through which to examine how simultaneous pressures from both above and below their level of governance in public education shape the way superintendents think, speak, and act regarding queer education policy.

MASS, MSBA, and the provincial Department of Education are all organizations *above* superintendents. By contrast, students, teachers, school administrators, and community members would be categorized as existing *below* superintendents in a policy momentum framework. Diffusion between these two groups and superintendents would be *vertical diffusion*. Fellow superintendents would exist along the same level of the framework, meaning any diffusion would be *horizontal diffusion*.

As superintendents described in the section above, they feel the repercussions of the institutional silence and deliberate disengagement from queer issues from the organizations above them. By observing the lack of queer policy engagement from these organizations,

superintendents engage in *policy learning*; a top-down (from a higher jurisdiction to a lower one) *vertical* mechanism of diffusion of observing the impact of a policy (or, in this case, lack of policy) and deciding whether or not they want to adopt a similar approach. *Mimicry* is also at play vertically between superintendents and their oversight organizations, with superintendents largely following the same approach of risk avoidance and silence.

Throughout the interviews, superintendents shared the ways they collaborate with their Manitoba colleagues. There are only 37 public school divisions; it is common for a superintendent, when presented with a challenge, to call up a fellow superintendent who has recently gone through a comparable situation. Similarly, several interviewees spoke about the role of collaboration in their policy-writing process, with rural superintendents in particular sharing that they often model their policy language off larger divisions' policies, since those larger divisions have more access to resources such as outside consultations, focus groups, and divisional specialists. Again, examining these actions through a policy momentum framework suggests that *policy learning* and *mimicry* are at play, this time *horizontally*.

Finally, throughout the interviews, superintendents described the pressures they experienced from their divisions' parents/caregivers. Every superintendent shared multiple experiences of dealing with vehemently anti-queer parents, who were not open to reasoned discussion, and who often fundamentally misunderstood the role and responsibilities of public education. Parents/caregivers kept their students home from Pride events, removed their students from health classes, and in several cases threatened to or did remove their families from the public school system entirely due to their opposition to queer inclusion in schools. These scenarios, which superintendents described as increasing in number and intensity over the past couple years, function as the diffusion mechanism of *vertical* (from a lower jurisdictional

category to a higher one) *coercion*; one group using its power to influence another group's decision to adopt a policy through incentives (McMahon, 2023). Interviewees also shared experiences of parents/caregivers calling or emailing regarding the pronoun policy changes in New Brunswick, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, demanding that Manitoba, and specifically their division, adopt a similar policy. This demonstrates *vertical policy learning*, with a policy in another province shaping the policy direction parents/caregivers want to take in their own school divisions.

Summary

This chapter began with an introduction, followed by an expanded discussion of my positionality as the researcher of this project. Next, I provided a brief overview of the project's data set, research questions, and theoretical frameworks. Finally, I shared my analysis of the data, organized into the following categories: ignorance and group membership; ignorance as political strategy; schools, prisons, and opportunities worth wanting; policy in the shadow of misinformation; anticipatory compliance; authority and constrained discourse; and policy momentum.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Introduction

This chapter begins with a summary of the key findings of this research project, in which the study's central and two sub-questions are answered. Next, I present three recommendations for practice: increasing professional development, establishing queer consultation pathways, and dismantling the leadership culture of risk aversion. Following this is a discussion of the study's limitations. The chapter ends with suggested future directions and recommendations for researchers studying superintendents, 2SLGBTQIA+ policy in public school systems, or both.

Summary of Key Findings

Central Research Question: Factors Explaining Superintendent Decision-Making

This study's central research question is: What factors (sociopolitical, institutional, and personal) might explain Manitoba superintendents' decision-making in reviewing, revising, creating, and/or leaving unchanged divisional policy documents relating to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues?

Data revealed several factors that might explain superintendent actions around queer-focused policy. Ignorance emerged as a central element of superintendent decision-making, with interviewees demonstrating a lack of basic knowledge of queer language and issues. This ignorance results in an avoidance or silence around queer policy at the upper administration level of school divisions, as the superintendents I interviewed were generally operating under the belief – or the pretense of the belief – that queer students are not in need of higher-quality policy that what their divisions currently have in place. Several interviewees did acknowledge that queer students face prejudice and mistreatment in the public school system, but simultaneously demonstrated – through their beliefs that their policies were adequate – an uncritical acceptance of school as a place of unconditional safety.

Interview data also revealed that misinformation plays a large role in how superintendents decide to engage with queer policy. Interviewees shared how social media informs the views of parents, caregivers, and community members in their divisions on queer issues, and how the information being provided to people online is often incorrect. Communicating productively with these individuals in their divisions is frustrating and often unsuccessful, and social media provides them with their own platform from which to perpetuate misinformation, in some cases leading to a snowball effect of anti-queer rhetoric. This phenomenon is particularly common in rural divisions, but was also articulated by superintendents working in metro school divisions. The result of this internet-driven echo chamber is a profound hesitancy by superintendents to publicly engage, or engage at all, with queer policy-making. Those superintendents who do attempt to change their division's policies often do so through discreet activism, which in turn affects the quality of the policy's consultation and rollout processes.

Tangential to the issue of increasing misinformation on queer issues in public education, interviewees repeatedly mentioned trustee election cycles as an area of concern. Superintendents are hired – or terminated, or not re-hired at the end of their contract cycle – by trustees, and a growing number of candidates in trustee election cycles run on an anti-diversity platform. These platforms are often driven by misinformed views around inclusion that originate from right-wing online activism. Once in place as school board trustees, superintendents are mandated to work alongside these individuals, and any issues around inclusion become all the more challenging to discuss at the board level. Further, superintendents expressed concern for their own job stability in the midst of this current rise in anti-diversity trustees; if superintendents lose favor with the board, they are at risk of losing their employment.

Another factor influencing superintendent decision-making around 2SLGBTQIA+ policy is workload. Interviewees expressed remorse and frustration at the number of areas in which they feel they

could make more change, if only they had more time. Rural superintendents shared the wide array of job duties – from HR to hiring to workplace safety and health – that they alone have to manage, often without assistant superintendent. The lack of additional personnel in divisional administration leads to rural superintendents' daily role often morphing into crisis management, with only the most pressing, time-sensitive matters getting completed on many workdays. This causes longer-term, non-urgent tasks – policy updates, strategic planning, etc. – to become afterthoughts rather than central assignments in a superintendent's job portfolio. Urban superintendents expressed a frustration with their workloads, sharing that, despite having larger support staffs, they also felt chronically overburdened, and worried that the competing demands inherent to running a school division often left them unable to complete non-urgent tasks. Note that both urban and rural superintendents implicitly named 2SLGBTQIA+ policy as a non-urgent task. Superintendents also felt that the incessant time constraints of their job left little to no time for self-reflective professional development; several shared they agreed to participate in this study specifically because it offered them an opportunity to reflect on their own professional practices, something they would otherwise not have time to do.

Finally, superintendent decision-making is strongly influenced by the discourse boundaries in place around queer policy discussions – and discussions about queerness more generally – in Manitoba public schools. The organizations that govern and guide superintendents – Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, Manitoba School Boards' Association, and the Province of Manitoba Department of Education – provide little or no guiding education, policy, or consultation around 2SLGBTQIA+ issues. In turn, this silence establishes a norm of institutional silence around queer-focused discussions and policy in Manitoba public education, which informs superintendents' decision-making on divisional policy.

Sub-Question One: Superintendent Sense-Making of Queer Policy Interactions

This study's first research sub-question is: How do Manitoba superintendents navigate and make sense of their processes of interaction with their divisions' 2SLGBTQIA+ administrative procedures and policy documents, including catalyst events, queer consultation, and policy rollout?

The selection bias of this research process, which was detailed in Chapter 3, likely resulted in the participants of this study representing some of the most engaged and educated superintendents in the province on 2SLGBTQIA+ issues, and the most actively involved in queer-focused policy work. Despite this likely being the case, of the five superintendents I interviewed, none had ever had a discussion in their role as superintendent with a queer person about their divisions' policies. All displayed some level of ignorance around queer vernacular and lived experience. Only one had ever taken professional development on 2SLGBTQIA+ topics. Only two had made changes to their queer policy during their tenure as superintendent, and in both cases the changes were minor tweaks around language, not content. Despite this, the superintendents who participated in this study generally viewed themselves as doing a good job in the area of supporting queer students through policy. When asked how they could do better, a common response was that they needed better guidance from their oversight organizations (MASS, MSBA, the Department of Education).

However, interviewees demonstrated uncertainties around this generally optimistic outlook on their professional performance regarding queer policy. In particular, participants periodically reflected on moments in their professional lives where they did not act, and looked back on these moments with some confusion. Superintendents described instances of disruptive community pushback against 2SLGBTQIA+ education (such as 50% absenteeism during a Pride Walk day, or the 1 Million March 4 Children protests) not resulting in a single conversation with their school board, teachers, or students –

and therefore also not resulting in any policy decisions. Even when pressed, interviewees could not articulate the intended goal of their silence, or what caused them to decide that silence was the optimal response.

While interviewees did not frame their silence or inaction as fear-based, interview data revealed that concern around potential backlash played a large role in superintendent decision-making on queer issues. School board trustees with anti-diversity platforms, vocally anti-queer parents strongly influenced by online right-wing communities, and high-profile school board meetings around book banning across the province were all mentioned by superintendents as they explained their thought processes behind engaging (or not engaging) with divisional queer-focused policy. None of the interviewees used the word ‘fear’, but several of them shared that the current political landscape leaves them hesitant to trigger media and community attention, and immediately concerned about potential backlash when the topic of 2SLGBTQIA+ comes up in a professional situation. Several interviewees shared that they could ‘handle’ the backlash and aggressive anti-queer rhetoric, and instead framed their hesitation as a proactive measure to shield queer students from backlash. The lack of engagement with queer issues at a divisional level was described by one interviewee as ‘harm reduction’ for 2SLGBTQIA+ students. However, this framing of avoidance as ‘harm reduction’ does not hold when considered under different equity-focused initiatives. If a parent group was advocating for residential denialism, would a superintendent frame a divisional refusal to speak against it as ‘harm reduction’ for Indigenous students? If there was 50% absenteeism on a day celebrating Black History Month, would a superintendent cancel the celebration the following year, citing ‘harm reduction’ for Black students? It seems unlikely. Tuck (2009) argues that individuals and institutions often respond to colonial violence and injustice by seeking a sense of absolution, innocence, or moral comfort rather than engaging with the ongoing structures that promote inequality. Examples of moves to innocence include symbolic

gestures, claims of good intentions, and frameworks that allow individuals or institutions to feel reconciled with the issue, while leaving underlying power relations intact (Tuck & Yang, 2012). By labeling their avoidance of the political volatility of queer issues as ‘harm reduction,’ superintendents turn to innocence (Tuck, 2009) rather than engaging with the root causes of the injustice being perpetrated.

Lastly, superintendents shared that their processes of interaction with policy often involved subjectively interpreting divisional processes. Policy development, from inception to consultation to rollout, is not clearly laid out in many divisions, particularly rural ones. Several interviewees shared instances of divisional queer policy not being followed, and that in their role as superintendent they knew and permitted the deviation from policy. Other interviewees described, as mentioned above, hesitancy around making changes to queer-focused policy public, and shared that they would likely minimize the public consultation element of policy development to the best of their ability in order to avoid backlash.

Sub-Question Two: Superintendent Sense-Making of Current Queer Policies

This study’s second research sub-question is: How do Manitoba superintendents make sense of and interact with the intent, content, and impact of the current 2SLGBTQIA+ administrative procedures and policies in their divisions?

As with both the primary research question as sub-question one, data revealed that ignorance plays a prominent role in how superintendents understand their divisions’ current queer policies. Superintendents shared that they were generally satisfied with their current policies, and felt they were effective in supporting queer students, staff, and families. Several superintendents expressed a belief in a ‘post-identity’ generation of children currently moving through the public education, sharing that, in their view as superintendents, queer students of today face little to no prejudice and sexuality and gender

diversity are no longer politically or socially salient. Similarly, interviewees expressed a confusion around queer teachers choosing to remain in the closet, and when questioned they could not name any changes to their current policies that might further support teachers in feeling safe to come out professionally. Superintendents demonstrated optimism and satisfaction with their divisions' current queer-focused policies, but could produce no data (anecdotal, statistic, empirical, or observational) to support this position.

Data also revealed a gap in data collection at the upper administration level regarding queer issues. As mentioned elsewhere in this thesis, not a single participant had ever had a discussion with a colleague, student, or family in their division about their division's queer policies. Further, none of the five interviewees had consulted with a queer person or organization external to their division regarding queer divisional policy. Participants were either unable to name an individual or organization they would reach out to if they wanted input on their division's policies, or they knew who they would reach out to and had simply chosen not to. The result of this consultation gap is that whatever sensemaking the superintendents interviewed for this project are doing around their divisions' policies, they are doing it alone, and from their positionality as straight, cisgender people.

Recommendations/Implications for Practice

I believe education is a liberative practice; I believe we ought all to have the opportunity to continuously get ourselves more free, through learning, for the full duration of our lives. "The only freedom which deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way," writes Mill (1859, p. 13). Education allows us each to pursue our own *good* and I hope – with the simultaneous grimness and optimism of a public school teacher who has seen the education system harm with one hand and help with the other a generation of queer students – pursue a higher standard of collective *good* for the communities in which we find ourselves.

Like many people who become teachers – and perhaps especially queer people – my connection to education extends beyond convenience or necessity; I feel I owe a debt. Learning guided me into becoming the only possible version of myself that could have survived into adulthood. However, due to my profession, my personal relationship to learning, or both, I now have an unfortunate tendency to view education as the singular route to solving – or at least significantly improving – any problem. Be it societal, structural, or personal, my default approach to reducing harm in the world around me is to throw learning at it (and, often, to despair when the violence/injustice/oppression proves itself immune). Which is why I find myself at a struggling to name education as the primary implication for practice stemming from the findings of this research project. Below, I detail key recommendations to mobilize education as a means to improve superintendent decision-making regarding queer-focused policy.

Increasing Professional Development

Findings from this research project indicate that offering Manitoba superintendents rich and frequent opportunities to engage with queer learning would improve their processes of interaction with 2SLGBTQIA+ policy in their divisions. Data from this research project demonstrates that superintendents generally believe their queer policies are adequate, and only one of the five participants had ever gone in search of queer-focused professional development. Unless opportunities for queer-focused learning are mandated by MASS, MSBA, or the Department of Education, the findings of this research project indicate an unlikelihood that many Manitoba superintendents would participate. However, the recruitment process for this research offers a somewhat contradictory narrative, and perhaps some hope. Both I and my advisory committee were concerned about whether any superintendents would participate in the study, and ultimately I had 11 superintendents or assistant superintendents who wanted to join. Clearly

there is an appetite amongst Manitoba superintendents to talk about queer issues in education; what remains to be seen is whether they have an appetite to *learn* alongside their appetite to *speak*.

Additional learning opportunities might also be helpful at the oversight organization level – MASS, MSBA, and the Department of Education. As discussed in both Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, these overseeing bodies play an enormous role in shaping the direction of queer-focused policy in Manitoba school divisions, and often that role is to silence. Again, I cannot speak to the degree of impact such learning might have on the members of these groups, only that it would likely positively impact the quality of discussion and policy-making around queerness in the province's public education system.

Establishing Queer Consultation Pathways

Interviewees spoke extensively about their desire to learn more about 2SLBGTQIA+ language, people, and lived experiences. When asked what an ideal professional learning experience around queer issues might look like, participants gave answers that all shared a common thread: the opportunity to have conversation with queer people. One participant suggested that conversation take the form of a panel of queer people, who superintendents could spend time asking the questions they feel unable to ask in other settings. Another participant suggested going to Winnipeg's Rainbow Resource Centre, to see and discuss the needs facing queer students directly from queer professionals. One superintendent shared that they wanted to shadow a queer student or colleague, to witness and discuss how their queerness impacts their experience at school. However, even if given such an experience, a superintendent lacking in queer pedagogical literacy (Mizzi & Walton, 2024) would likely fail to read the experiences they witnessed through a queer lens. Without guided learning through reflection and relational

learning, the experience of shadowing a queer student or colleague would likely not challenge the superintendent's understanding of what they witnessed, and might further contribute to a superintendent's myopic or flattened view of queer lived experience (Mizzi & Walton, 2024).

In order to make the rich learning opportunities participants suggested a reality, superintendents (and MASS, and MSBA) need to establish queer consultation pathways. Relationships need to be forged with community groups (such as The Rainbow Resource Centre) and with individuals or groups in individual school divisions (such as 2SLGBTQIA+ student groups, educators networks, or parent councils) so that superintendents have access to authentic consultation and feedback that is rooted in respect and community with queer people, rather than tokenism or performative inclusion.

Limitations of the Study

This research project contains several limitations. Firstly, the scope and timeline of a master's thesis limits the number of possible participants a study can include. This project aimed to interview three to five superintendents; as described in Chapter 4, many other superintendents expressed interest in participating in this study, but unfortunately the maximum of five interviewees prohibited several interested individuals from participating. Any more than five interviewees would have resulted in more data that I, as the sole researcher working on this project, could effectively analyse with the level of academic rigor required for graduate work within the timeline of a master's program. However, the study would likely have been strengthened by the inclusion of additional participants, as my interview pool represented only five of the thirty-eight public school superintendents currently working in Manitoba.

A second limitation specific to this study's participant pool is the fact that all the participants worked in Manitoba. While this was a deliberate choice in order to examine the

specific decision-making and policy contexts of Manitoba superintendents, a study involving superintendents from across Canada might have offered greater variety in responses, and therefore richer data. However, unless the participant number was raised from the current maximum of five, a cross-Canada participant pool would likely have failed to offer the detailed picture of individual provinces' public education systems the way that this project was able to, as there would not have been multiple participants from the same provincial system.

Another limitation of this study is the choice to conduct the interviews individually with each participant. Several times during interviews, I would reflect on a participant's response and wonder how the other four participants would have engaged with it. This curiosity only grew as I interviewed each superintendent and, in my mind as I listened, their answers were placed in the context of their colleagues' answers. There are many reasons why a focus group interview format would not have worked for this study – primarily, confidentiality issues and scheduling challenges. Superintendents' responses could not be guaranteed to be kept confidential in a focus group setting, and their responses would be impacted by this loss of anonymity. Additionally, scheduling multiple superintendents to meet at the same time would be logistically complex; simply arranging a one-hour, one-on-one interview with each superintendent for this project often involved several cancelled and rescheduled meetings, and long email chains with their administrative assistants. Arranging and confirming five superintendents to attend the same interview would be, I imagine, nearly impossible.

Directions for Future Study

I chose to research superintendent decision-making on queer policy in large part due to the lack of research currently available on both superintendents and queer policy in education.

Future directions and recommendations are widespread, as this project alone can certainly not fill the significant gap in literature on these topics.

As detailed in Chapter 4, recruitment for this project was far easier than anticipated. The surprising level of uptake from the Manitoba superintendent community indicates an opportunity for future researchers to engage with this participant pool. The superintendents I communicated with during recruitment expressed deep enthusiasm for participating in research, sharing that they saw it as a way to contribute to their field. Future research projects centered around superintendent participation, whether policy-focused or otherwise, would likely yield similarly high levels of engagement. Based on my experience when proposing this thesis project, concerns around recruitment are a common deterrent to conducting research in educational leadership. This project indicates that recruitment for superintendent research, at least in Manitoba, need not be a concern for future studies.

As mentioned in Chapters 4 and 5, misinformation plays a growing role in queer policy-making in education. One recommendation, therefore, is for increased study of the mobilization structures of misinformation targeting 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. Further research on the ways misinformation impacts education policy might provide a clearer map for effective mechanisms to challenge and interrupt misinformation before it seeps (further) into student behaviour at Pride Walks, trustee presentations at school board meetings, and the rhetoric of right-leaning political figures. “Toxicity is now a question of degree, of acceptable parts per unit,” writes Maggie Nelson (2015, p. 100). The misinformation is already here, already polluting our education system and eroding any progress made in the past quarter-century to the lives of queer students, educators, and families. Additional research is crucial to formulate a counter-strategy.

Conclusion

Through the process of interviewing superintendents, analyzing policy decisions, and applying the lenses of queer democratic theory and policy momentum theory, this study revealed that the development and maintenance of queer-focused policy is shaped by intersecting forces, including individual knowledge and positionality, institutional structures, political pressures, community dynamics, and broader social narratives. The findings of this study demonstrate that policy does not exist in isolation. A policy document may represent a division's stated commitments, but its creation, interpretation, and implementation are shaped by the people and systems surrounding it.

This study also demonstrates the importance of recognizing the limits of individual leadership while still acknowledging the power of individual leaders. Superintendents cannot dismantle systemic inequities alone. However, educational leaders possess significant influence over the values, priorities, and practices of their divisions – and by extension, influence over the lived experiences of their students and staff. The choices superintendents make regarding what is examined, what is learned, whose voices are sought, and which policies are prioritized shape the experiences of both queer and non-queer individuals in their school communities.

Future work in the area of 2SLGBTQIA+ education policy must continue to examine how educational systems and leaders can create meaningful opportunities for queer-focused professional learning, establish authentic consultation pathways with 2SLGBTQIA+ communities, and investigate the structures through which misinformation and anti-queer narratives gain influence in public education.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Prospective Participant Email

Appendix B: Prospective Participant Voicemail Message

Appendix C: Interview Questions

Appendix D: Consent Form

Appendix E: TCPS 2 Certificate

Appendix A

Prospective Participant Email

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Rebecca Pritchard, and I'm a middle years educator and graduate student pursuing my Master's degree in Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology at the University of Manitoba.

I'm writing to request your participation in an upcoming research project I'm leading, which focuses on 2SLGBTQIA+ policies in Manitoba public school divisions. Participants must be currently employed as a superintendent or assistant superintendent in a Manitoba public school division. Your participation in this study would contribute to the field of equitable education policy research.

The interview process would involve a one-on-one conversation via Zoom or in-person at your place of work, at a time and date that is most convenient for you. The interview is expected to take approximately one hour. All information provided, including your name, position, and school division, would be completely confidential in this study. This study has been approved by the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board.

If you are interested in participating or have questions, please respond to this email or reach out via phone. I can be reached at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you very much for considering my request. Your time and expertise are greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,
Rebecca Pritchard (she/her)

Study Advisor:
Dr. Nathalie Piquemal
Department of Educational Administration, Foundations & Psychology
University of Manitoba
professor@umanitoba.ca

Appendix B

Prospective Participant Voicemail Message

Hello [Recipient's Name]. My name is Rebecca Pritchard, and I'm a middle years educator and graduate student pursuing my Master's degree at the University of Manitoba. My advisor is Dr. Nathalie Piquemal. I'm calling to follow up on an email I sent recently to request your participation in a research project I'm leading. The study focuses on 2SLGBTQIA+ policies in Manitoba public school divisions. Participants must be currently employed as a superintendent or assistant superintendent in a Manitoba public school division. Your participation in this study would contribute to the field of equitable education policy research. The interview process would involve a one-on-one conversation via Zoom or in-person at your place of work, at a time and date that is most convenient for you. The interview is expected to take approximately one hour. All information provided, including your name, position, and school division, would be completely confidential in this study. This study has been approved by the University of Manitoba Research Ethics Board. If you are interested in participating or have questions, you can call me back at XXX-XXX-XXXX, or send me an email at student@myumanitoba.ca. Thank you very much for considering my request, and I look forward to hearing back from you.

Appendix C

Interview Guide

Hello. My name is Rebecca Pritchard and I'm a graduate student at the University of Manitoba in the Department of Educational Administration, Foundations and Psychology. Thank you so much for offering your time and expertise to participate in this research project. Today's interview should take about 1 hour, during which we'll work through the questions in the interview guide I sent to you following your submission of the consent form. Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Can you tell me a little about your school division? Location, demographics, student and staff size?
2. What are some of your major duties and responsibilities as a superintendent/assistant superintendent?
3. How long have you been in your current role? What was your career path leading to this role?
4. What do you see as the central function(s) or goal(s) of 2SLGBTQIA+ specific education policy?
5. In considering the specific policies in place in your division, what do you think is their intent in regards to your staff, students, and community? What about their impact?
6. Has your division made any changes to 2SLGBTQIA+ policy in the past 18 months? If so, what catalyzed those changes?
7. Have there been any discussions about 2SLGBTQIA+ policy at the upper administration or school board level in your division in the past 18 months?
8. Have you ever spoken to a 2SLGBTQIA+ person – staff member, student, community member – about your division's policies?
9. Does your division have any reporting mechanisms (formal or informal) in place to learn how 2SLGBTQIA+ students feel about the current policies? For staff? For community members?
10. Do you find that you approach equity-focused policy any differently than non-equity-focused policy? For example, a discussion about pronoun policies versus a discussion about attendance policies.
11. What professional training or support do you receive specific to 2SLGBTQIA+ issues? Do you feel it's adequate? What else would help you navigate 2SLGBTQIA+ policy development in your division?
12. How do you feel that broader political discussions in the past 18 months around 2SLGBTQIA+ policy (in education, healthcare, etc.) have influenced your division?
13. What influence do the 2SLGBTQIA+ policy choices of other Manitoba school divisions have on your own division?
14. Do you have any experiences of rolling out new or updated 2SLGBTQIA+ policy in your division? How did the rollout process unfold?
15. I'd like to present you with a fictional, hypothetical situation, and have you share how you would respond. A Grade 10 student makes contact with you. She says that for the past six months her math teacher has been refusing to use her preferred name and pronouns. The student says she's already reached out to her principal, but was told that teacher was "doing the best they could" but often forgot or accidentally used the wrong name and pronouns. The student says the

principal also misgendered her twice in the meeting, but apologized both times. Since that meeting, the math teacher has not improved their behaviour in-class. The student makes clear that she doesn't want her parents to know about her name and pronoun change, but she wants them to be used in-school. How would you engage with this situation?

16. Are there any other specific situations you've encountered or insights you've gained from interacting with 2SLGBTQIA+ policies as a superintendent/assistant superintendent that we haven't discussed that you'd like to share?

Appendix D



Participant Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: Manitoba Superintendents' Experiences with 2SLGBTQIA+ Education Policy

Student Principal Investigator:

Rebecca Pritchard
 M.Ed. Student
 Department of Educational Administration, Foundations & Psychology
 Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba
 Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX
 Email: *student@myumanitoba.ca*

Student Advisor:

Dr. Nathalie Piquemal
 Professor
 Department of Educational Administration, Foundations & Psychology
 Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba
 Phone: XXX-XXX-XXXX
 Email: *professor@umanitoba.ca*

Conflicts of Interest and Undue Influence:

None of the researchers have any conflicts of interest in this study.

You are being invited to participate in a research study. This consent form, a copy of which you can download and print, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, feel free to ask any of the people named above. Please take the time to read this document and any accompanying information carefully. It is very important that you understand:

- what is being asked of you,
- what the risks and benefits of participation are, and
- how the information you provide will be used and stored.

Purpose of the Study:

I am doing this research for a thesis under the supervision of Dr. Nathalie Piquemal. This research study aims to find out more about the decisions superintendents and assistant superintendents make

regarding 2SLGBTQIA+ policy in their divisions. We are hoping to learn about what factors impact their decision-making, and in what ways.

Study Procedures:

If you decide to take part in the study, we will meet for a 1-hour interview. You will have the option of either meeting via UM Zoom, or in-person at your place of work. With your consent, I will record our meeting. UM Zoom meetings will be recorded in audio format using the recording option on Zoom. In-person meetings will be recorded in only audio format, using my phone. I will also be taking notes during and/or after the interview.

Study Risks:

This study is minimal risk, meaning the risks are no greater than what you might encounter in your daily life. All participants will be encouraged to reach out to Kii, MTS's Employee Assistance Program, for additional emotional support if needed.

Study Benefits:

The direct benefit of this study to participants is the opportunity to reflect on the role of 2SLGBTQIA+ policy in education. As busy leaders, superintendents do not always have time to reflect on choices and experiences around queer policy. You may benefit from this focused reflection to continue building best practices for equity-based policy decisions moving forward.

Indirect benefits of participating in this study are:

- a) Helping those who do not work in the field of education understand the roles and responsibilities of superintendents in building equitable schools.
- b) Contributing to the ongoing development of high-quality 2SLGBTQIA+ education policy. By sharing your experiences, you are helping to understand and improve equity measures in Manitoba schools and school divisions.

Compensation:

There is no compensation for this study.

Use and Storage of Information:

All the information you provide as a participant in this study is confidential which means we as the research team must keep it safe. We will do our best, however, it is not possible to guarantee absolute confidentiality. We will only share your personal information if required through a court order or law (e.g., suspected child or elder abuse).

Your information will be stored in University of Manitoba OneDrive. We will have a file that links your name to your information using a pseudonym. We will keep the file with your name, contact information, and pseudonym separate from the research information you share with us. When we share the results of this study, we will combine everybody's responses. We may use some of your information through quotes. The quotes will not include your name. Your interview recordings and the transcripts will be deleted in June 2026.

Your research information may be shared outside of the University of Manitoba with researchers, other organizations, and/or made publicly available. The information is being shared for further analysis or testing, as part of the research study, and/or because it is required by a funder or journal. It will not include your name or any information that could identify you.

Dissemination:

The study results will be shared through 1) the publication of a master's thesis; 2) journal publications and presentations in relevant academic fields; and/or 3) a summarized report of the study results to be sent to interested participants.

Withdrawing:

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You can choose to answer only the questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the study for any reason. You do not have to explain why. You will not be penalized in any way.

If you wish to withdraw, you can do so by contacting Rebecca Pritchard by phone or by email. If you withdraw, the audio recordings and transcripts of your interview will be destroyed, and there will be no mention of your participation or data in the thesis. The final date for participants to withdraw is June 30th, 2025.

Questions or concerns:

Designated University of Manitoba personnel may check this study is being done safely and properly. To do this, they may visit the study site or review the research records. We will tell you if someone outside the research team will be there while you are participating. If this makes you uncomfortable, please tell a member of the research team, who will ask the personnel to return at another time.

This study has been reviewed and approved by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba. However, this does not mean that participation is risk-free. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Human Research Ethics at huamnethics@umanitoba.ca or (204) 474-7122.

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about this study, you may contact any members of the research team listed on the first page or the Office of Human Research Ethics.

Consent:

By signing this document, I agree that:

- I have read the above information or had it read to me.
- I have had the opportunity to ask and have answered all of my questions.
- I understand what is being asked of me.
- I will be taking part in a research study.
- I may freely stop or leave the research study activities at any time.
- My information may be shared outside the University of Manitoba.
- I do not waive my legal rights by participating in the study.

Notice Regarding Collection, Use, and Disclosure of Personal Information:

Your personal information is being collected under the authority of *The University of Manitoba Act*. The University of Manitoba is committed to preserving your right to privacy. The information you provide will be used by the University to support our research. Your personal information will not be used or disclosed for other purposes, unless permitted by *The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* or *The Personal Health Information Act*. If you have any questions about the collection of personal information: Ph: 204-474-9462 or Email: fippa@umanitoba.ca

I agree to participate in this study. (Please circle)	YES NO
---	------------------------------

 Name of Participant

 Participant's Signature

 Date

 Name of Principal Investigator

 Principal Investigator's Signature

 Date

You will receive a copy of your signed consent letter.

Summary of Results

Please provide an email address below if you would like to receive a summary of the results of this study, which will be sent by September 2025.

Email address: _____

Appendix E

TCPS 2 Certificate

