Neither *Il* nor *Elle*: A Study of Gender Non-Conforming Student Experience in Ontario Public French-Language Education

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Abstract

This study explores the ways gender-neutral or gender-inclusive French language is making its way into Ontario public anglophone FSL classrooms. Ontario French curriculum, and Ontario public school board policies and guidelines were examined. Six gender nonconforming participants underwent semi-structured interviews, detailing their experiences in French classes as recent graduates from Ontario public anglophone schools. From these two lines of evidence, two articles are presented. The first highlights the curriculum and policy documents and their mentions (or lack-there-of) of inclusive or gender-neutral French. The second amplifies the individual voices of the six participants who share their experiences of (in)visibility, representation, and belonging in the French classroom. Suggested improvements for French education from participants are presented.

Dedication

To the participants of this study, thank you for the courage it takes to speak, to remember, and to share. Your stories have shaped this thesis and will continue to shape the work I do. I am honoured by your trust.

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Introduction

Language is powerful.

The words we choose to refer to others matter. When there is a disconnect between the pronouns people select for themselves and the pronouns that are used by others, the consequences may be dire. The Trevor Project (2020) found that "Transgender and nonbinary young people who reported having pronouns respected by all or most people in their lives attempted suicide at half the rate of those who did not have their pronouns respected" (p. 2). Using respectful language, such as referring to someone by the pronoun they have chosen, is not simply the right thing to do; it is a life-saving act.

We learn how to use language respectfully from our families, our communities, and importantly, our teachers. Educators teaching language classes aim to convey curriculum, and evaluate students based on the appropriate usage of language conventions. In other words, teachers teach us the "right" and "wrong" ways of using language.

In 2021, the Canadian census reported more than 100,000 people aged 15 and over identified as transgender or nonbinary; roughly 1 in 300 people (Easton, 2022). This represents the non-negligeable student population. For those students, having their pronouns respected by all or most people in their lives includes their teachers, peers, and friends. What happens when the language educators teach that there is no gender-neutral pronoun available? Furthermore, what happens when teachers instruct students to use a gender binary for almost all language forms? How do transgender or nonbinary students conjugate a verb, or use an adjective with appropriate agreements? This is the case for the French language, the language class that is mandatory for a minimum of five years and can be taken for up to 12 years in Ontario anglophone public schools (OME, 2013 & 2014). Historically, French has been taught using a binary-gendered grammatical

system. In modern French, gendered pronouns are taught as either “il” for masculine, or “elle” for feminine, often with no neutral option shared. When talking about a group of people of various genders, grammatically, students are taught that the masculine dominates over all. The masculine was selected specifically by male grammarians to be the dominant gender. More recently, grammarians, activists, feminists, and gender non-conforming French-language users have developed additional language that aims to be less sexist, more feminist, and in some cases even gender-neutral. These efforts are in line with broader efforts to bring visibility and representation to transgender and nonbinary people worldwide. In contrast, in English, the pronouns “they/them” have grown in popularity to more respectfully address gender non-conforming people.

In what ways is inclusive French being taught in Ontario schools? A recent report revealed a handful of French educators across the province showed lack of awareness of gender-affirming French linguistic developments (Kassen et al., 2022). Current school board guidelines from the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, located in one of the most bilingual regions of the province, openly acknowledged the lack of staff and student knowledge of gender-inclusive language in French (OCDSB, 2021). Most anglophone Ontario public school boards have no mention of any kind of gender-diverse French language options in their publicly available policies, procedures, or guidelines despite teaching French in their classrooms. There are Ontario school boards that have published policies on accommodating transgender and nonbinary students. Said policies, however, also require the students to “out” themselves to gain access to accommodations (Martino et al., 2020). There is no province-wide expectation for gender-inclusive French instruction in Ontario classrooms.

Teaching French in a binary way leaves limited space for gender non-conforming people to exist, be visible, or be addressed respectfully in a manner that affirms their gender identity. To

teach French in a more gender-inclusive way would be to teach everyone to do a life-saving act. Respecting and using someone's pronouns can help to save their life.

The purpose of this qualitative study research is two-fold – to investigate the extent to which the curriculum and school board documents promote the teaching of inclusive French language, and to explore the impacts of teaching French in a binary way on Ontario students who do not identify exclusively within said binary. The research questions this thesis aims to address are: 1) How do Ontario's French as a Second Language curriculum and school board policies enable, constrain, or overlook the use of gender-neutral and gender-inclusive French in public education? 2) How do transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) students describe their sense of (in)visibility, representation, and belonging as they learned French as a second language within such institutional and policy contexts?

The findings from this qualitative study are shared through two articles. The first examines past and present Ontario FSL curriculum, as well as four Ontario anglophone public school board policies, procedures, and guidelines that mention inclusive French. This article draws on critical discourse analysis to discuss how the change in curriculum policy documents makes some, although limited, space for gender diversity to be accepted in the French classroom, and the shortcomings in the policies and how they can improve to better address the systemic exclusion of gender non-conforming students in the French classroom. The second article draws from interviews conducted with six gender non-conforming high school graduates from the Ontario anglophone public school context to understand their experiences with French-language exclusion. These semi-structured interviews took place from 2022 to 2023. In turn, they were analyzed using critical discourse analysis. The participants share their suggestions for change to improve the state of Ontario's anglophone public French classes for other gender non-conforming students.

Relevant Context

Vocabulary

Gender identity is constantly evolving. There is much vocabulary surrounding the 2SLGBTQI community, and an even more vast array of understandings of these terms. Terms used within the 2SLGBTQI community may have different meanings to different people. Gender and sexual orientation are not the same; who you are and who you are attracted to are two completely different characteristics. Similarly, gender and sex assigned at birth are not the same. Gender identity can be how you feel about who you are; how you choose to identify, either privately or publicly; or a negotiation of this in different contexts depending on safety and comfort. Sex assigned at birth is most often declared by a doctor, usually based solely on physical anatomy and almost always a binary of male/female.

Barker and Iantaffi (2019) define gender as a complex biopsychosocial construct, meaning there are biological, psychological, and social components of gender that are all related (p. 58). Stryker (2021) notes that gender is cultural, and that everyone is assigned one and comes to either identify with, or not, through socialization (p. 14). These definitions have in common the theme of movement; gender is a process, a construct that is defined by movement and performance in society. Gender identity is defined by Kassen et al. (2023) as a person's individual sense of gender – their internal feeling of being "a girl, a boy, neither, both, and more" (p. 12). When someone's gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth, they are a cisgender person. People who do not identify with that term are referred to as transgender, although this dichotomy presents a cis/trans binary (Barker & Iantaffi, 2019). Stryker (2021) returns to this idea of movement when describing transgender identity:

> Some people move away from their birth-assigned gender because they feel strongly that they properly belong to another gender through which it would be better for them to live; others want to strike out toward some new location, some space not yet clearly described or concretely occupied; still others simply feel the need to challenge the conventional expectations bound up with the gender that was initially put upon them. (p. 1)

Even biologically, a binary does not fully explain the wide range of people. Intersex people represent up to 1.7% of the Canadian population (Egale, 2023). Some people may ask why the language amongst the 2SLGBTQI community is constantly changing. It evolves, rather, to better suit the needs of the people using the language. New words are invented, pronouns altered, all to more accurately describe the people using them. Throughout this thesis, the term transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) is used, whereas other times gender nonconforming (GNC) is used. This is intentional to discuss the important differences between the binary-identifying transgender community and the nonconforming community. Language has different impacts depending on which group of people is being discussed.

Gender Diversity

Gender diversity is the space in between, outside, and in rejection of man and woman identities. Not all gender nonconforming people will identify with or use the term transgender to describe themselves. A Gender Agenda (2021) defines gender diversity as an umbrella term "which refers to broad range of gender identities that reflect a diversity of expression beyond the gender binary." Many transgender people identify with a binary gender identity, and some do not. People who identify with an identity outside of the male-female binary are often referred to as "nonbinary." Nonbinary is another umbrella term, encompassing other gender diverse identities such as genderfluid, genderqueer, agender, and many more.

There is culturally specific vocabulary for additional genders outside of the Western colonial binary contexts. An example is Two-Spirit, which Stryker (2021) labels as a "catchall term for various indigenous American genders" (p. 35). Other terms include the Indian hijra, or the Polynesian mahu (Stryker, 2021). It is important to remember that gender diverse people have existed since time immemorial, and that colonialism has had a devastating impact on how Western society views gender as a strict binary.

Gender non-conforming people are often lumped in not only with the binary transgender community, but also with the larger 2SLGBTQI community. It is important to distinguish the unique realities that gender-diverse people face that are not homogenous with all trans people, nor those holding identities related to their sexual orientation. This is especially relevant when discussing disclosure of trans or gender non-conforming identities, such as the process known as "coming out." When coming out, transgender or gender nonconforming (TGNC) people present a gender "history", rather than identity, which differs from LGB coming out narratives (Zimman, 2009). Coming out is an ongoing process, a continuous process, because people are always encountering new people and new social interactions in which they may choose to self-identify in terms of gender identity.

Language impacts worldview. Gender identity is constructed through language, and the vocabulary, adjectives, and pronouns we choose reflect that construction. Gender nonconforming people, such as nonbinary people, genderfluid people, agender people, and others may choose to select pronouns other than the binary options of he/him or she/her. There are infinite neopronoun options in English, but the most common gender-neutral pronouns are they/them. In French, gendered implications in the language are less straightforward. As gender influences not just pronouns but adjective agreements and verb conjugations, French presents a more challenging case

than the common pronoun debate. In French classes in Ontario, it is unclear how the issue of gender diversity is being addressed. On top of French language classes being mandatory in Ontario public schools, there are numerous other hurdles gender non-conforming students face every day.

Systemic Barriers

Schools are seen as spaces to promote equity, diversity, and inclusivity. However, the binary systems they continue to present and enforce are not in line with this initiative. Washroom choices, theater and choir roles, prom royalty, dress codes, and sports teams are a few examples of the commonly debated topics with respect to TGNC inclusion at school. It is important to remember that not all TGNC students will be out at school. In addition, being "out" is a fluid process, not a one-and-done public declaration – it requires constant emphasis for any social encounter. Holding a TGNC identity can also be fluid, and static thinking regarding their identities is incorrect. Martino et al. (2020) reinforce that current trans-affirming policies in educational institutions require students to out themselves in order to gain access to the accommodations outlined in the policy.

Before choosing to disclose a TGNC identity, students may have to weigh confidentiality concerns, as well as a risk assessment. Egale Canada's national study examining youth experiences in schools found that despite there being a general decline in transphobic language, as well as verbal and physical harassment of 2SLGBTQI students, GNC participants hear transphobic language at least weekly in school (Peter et al., 2021, p. 45). Teachers have been shown to contribute to the oppression and victimization of LGBTQ students (Meyer et al., 2015; Kosciw et al., 2016). Educators also reinforce heteronormativity and cisnormativity (Menzies & Santoro, 2018).

Addressing some of these issues, certain school boards have created gender-identity specific guidelines, policies and procedures to follow. The majority of Ontario public anglophone school boards have policies related to human rights, equity and inclusion, anti-discrimination, and 2SLGBTQI students. Despite all Ontario public anglophone schools being required to teach French, their trans inclusion policies and guidelines are written with reference to English education solely. A search found only four school boards, Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, Renfrew County District School Board, Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, and Durham District School Board. The extent to which these documents detail how gender identity impacts the French language and/or the existence of gender-inclusive French language is a central focus of this study..

Gender-Neutral French Language

All languages evolve over time, and French is no exception. Up until the 16th century, the proximity agreement was used (Labrosse, 1996; Lessard & Zaccour, 2017). This agreement describes the way in which verbs and adjectives are influenced based on gender identity of the subject that is closest. The categorization of the grammatical masculine as the neutral was a choice made by male grammarians to designate male superiority. In 1767, grammarian Nicolas Beauzée said "[Le] genre masculine est repute plus noble que le féminin, à cause de la supériorité du mâle sur la femelle" (*The masculine gender is considered nobler than the feminine, because of the superiority of the male over the female*) (Labrosse, 1996, p. 28, my translation). The way gender identity and gender expression terminology are being developed outside of the law and within educational spaces speaks to the collective understanding of these terms (Kirkup et al., 2020). Changing the way a language is taught is controversial, but in this case, it should not be. It also takes time, but again, the time needed is to teach French educators, students, and the wider public educational community about trans-affirming French language. There are more examples of

inclusive and gender-neutral French language throughout this thesis, explained further in the literature review.

Select Examples

Pronouns

Masculine: il

Feminine: elle

Neutral: iel, al, ol, ul

Adjectives

Masculine: beaux, bel

Feminine: belle

Neutral: belleaux, beauxe

Occupations

Masculine: auteur

Feminine: auteure, autrice

Neutral: autaire

Verb Conjugations

Masculine: Il est allé

Feminine: Elle est allée

Neutral: Iel est allé.e, Al est allé(e)

Positionality

I am a white settler, living and working on the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, Haudenosaunee, Attiwonderonk, and the Anishinabewaki traditional territories, in the city of Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. I am an Ontario College of Teacher's certified educator and currently working as an occasional elementary and secondary teacher in my local school board. I mostly work in French-immersion schools, or in French-language classrooms. Additionally, I identify as nonbinary and queer and use the pronouns they/them in English and al in French, with neutral agreements. My positionality is especially relevant to this research and is quite frankly the basis for my interest. As a student in French immersion programs and French-language classes all throughout my educational career, I have met numerous barriers in relation to my access to gender-neutral language. Every year, I have asked my French teachers what neutral language exists. Every year I received the same answer, "Ça n'existe pas." All I heard, however, was that I did not exist, that my identity did not exist. My experience in language classrooms and with language learning in general has been relatively negative as a result. I was forced to do my own research in order to gain access to the language that affirms my gender identity. Changing the way a language is taught is controversial and takes time. As a result, I have selected this topic to uncover how this topic is addressed (or not) in guiding educational documents, and to discover what other Ontario students, whose gender identities exist beyond the binary have experienced in relation to gender inclusion or exclusion in the FSL classroom.

Literature Review

This project addresses the intersection of many topics. These include the societal attitudes towards gender identity and how those are addressed through society-level forces such as human rights codes, the roles and responsibilities of education systems and educators, the impact of those educational choices on nonbinary students, how French-language addresses nonbinary people, the development and use of alternatives, and how they all combine to create experiences for French instruction on nonbinary people. Many of these topics have been studied at length and in detail, while other areas are relatively new, with few published works but substantial topical interest.

Societal and Cultural Context

Considerable research exists on the societal and cultural impacts both of recognizing and understanding people with non-binary identity, and the potential harms that result when that recognition and understanding is absent. This includes discussions about definitions, the differences between biological sex, gender, and different descriptions of those that do not easily fit into the prominent binary systems. There are both the formal recognitions through instruments of the state, such as Human Rights Codes, but also the informal recognition of society more generally, through language, and through common use. Ashley (2023) explores the concept of gender identity, claiming it is "how we make sense of our gender subjectivity, the totality of our gendered experiences of ourselves" (p. 1). The author presents a theory of gender identity that is constructed the same way regardless of cisgender or transgender subjects. This article explores how it can be possible for all kinds of gender identities to be valid. In short, the author presents the theory that gender subjectivity (the totality of one's gendered experiences of self) is made up by those experiences but not determined by them, therefore multiple identities can arise coherently from the same "building materials." Kirkup et al. (2020) finds that Ontario school boards do not simply copy Ontario Human Rights Codes language, they reword and universalize definitions in

policies, which actively reshape what "gender identity" and "gender expression" mean and how they are applied in schools. Ashley (2018) explaines how the Quebec Charter promises several protections for TGNC people, some of which include an obligation to respect requested pronouns and agreements (p. 45).

Responsibility of Public Education

Education systems are integral to that greater social and cultural context. In some ways, schools are a microcosm of that greater society. The rules generally accepted by society materialize in individual classrooms, through the choices of school boards and individual teachers. On the more specific levels, this could include acknowledging gender diversity and then including best practices and guidelines to foster inclusive spaces in schools. There are social and cultural implications of teaching gendered languages in classrooms. These implications include the impacts of teaching a solely binary gendered language, both explicitly through classroom instruction, and subconsciously through language. Gour's (2015) master's thesis investigated French teacher perceptions of the new 2013 curriculum in Ontario. Among the four participants, there was a shared belief that a "specific 'type' of teacher was required to implement the new curriculum – notably a flexible, open-minded individual" (p. 72).

Dean Spade's "Normal Life" (2015) explores administrative violence and the limits of law with regards to protections for transgender and gender nonconforming people. In "Normal Life", Spade finds preventative policies do not have a deterrent effect. Comparing law to school policy, it is difficult to ask teachers (the people commonly doing the misgendering) to not only learn inclusive French to stop misgendering students, but also to teach inclusive French and stop others from misgendering nonbinary students. Explained by Spade, "hate crime laws strengthen and legitimize the criminal punishment system, a system that targets the very people these laws are

supposedly passed to protect" (p. 45). Having a board policy that mentions inclusive French is a step in the right direction, but it is not nearly a guarantee that those policies are being practiced, which would require the perspective of students. Being mindful of how those policies are being enacted and monitored is important to not cause additional harm to the students the policy is intended to protect. Greey (2023) argued that policy is not enough on its own for TGNC students to be safe and supported in schools (p. 688). They find that many school board documents from all Ontario public school boards address individual-level obstacles to TGNC inclusion, whereas just two-thirds of the school boards take a systemic approach such as challenging cisgender binary-based practices (p. 688). Policy implementation is often considered to be a responsibility of school administration. The participants in Leonardi & Staley (2018) share how "doing the work" related to trans inclusion in schools and maintaining the momentum of "the work" was challenging (p. 761).

Knisely & Paiz (2021) urge teachers to not consider trans inclusion as a "one-and-done" topic, but rather an "early and often" approach by incorporating LGBTQ+ issues into the curriculum (p. 31). Martino et al (2020) finds "Trans visibility is contingent upon a student being required to declare their identity" (p. 2). Though there may be policy-level statements of inclusion, the studies suggest that classroom level experiences are done as exceptions to the norm, rather than part of it. Grant & Smith (2025) finds that queer FSL teachers named a variety of barriers to inclusive French in classrooms, namely teacher education silence, and lack of support for teachers. The authors urge for practical training, more resources, and mentorship on modeling and implementing gender-inclusive forms to disrupt cisheteronormativity in classrooms.

Nonbinary Student Experience

The experience of non-binary students in classrooms in Canada has been studied on both a general level, and more specifically in the context of language instruction, and how their experiences with gender and language impact their sense of identity, well-being, safety and social inclusion. Greey (2023) writes **"**how school leadership responds to and anticipates trans and nonbinary students can dramatically alter students' experiences of membership and belonging in their schools" (p. 688). Kosciw et al. (2016) finds that "LGBTQ students experienced a safer, more positive school environment when they were taught positive representations of LGBT people, history, and events through their school curriculum" (p. 61). They also report LGBTQ students avoiding unsafe binary spaces in their schools, such as "bathrooms, locker rooms, and P.E. classes" (p. 126). Davies et al. (2019) similarly finds binary facilities such as washrooms can cause anxiety for non-binary students. In Paechter et al. (2021), nonbinary students felt invisible at school (p. 695). Non-binary students experience more discrimination than binary-trans students, which the authors blame on the lack of inclusive facilities in schools (Bower-Brown et al., 2021). Some efforts, such as GSAs[1], are intended to be a space for marginalized 2SLGBTQI students to find community. However, they can sometimes exclude those who are different (Adelman et al., 2022).

But on the impact of language and safety, "Transgender and nonbinary youth who reported having pronouns respected by all or most people in their lives attempted suicide at half the rate of those who did not have their pronouns respected" (The Trevor Project, 2020, p. 2). More research is needed to address the ways language classrooms are adding to or are helping prevent this kind of harm.

Inclusive French

[1] Gender sexuality alliances, or gay straight alliances

There are considerable published works on recent efforts to address the inadequacies of the French language (and other gendered, romantic languages) in dealing with TGNC people. In French, this is sometimes part of an effort to also describe the impact of the masculine generic, which Brauer (2008) finds is "far from being neutral as some people claim", and that the use of the masculine generic favours masculine mental representation over neutral ones (p. 268). Ashley (2019) describes how inclusive French was originated with the goal of making women visible in the language. Initiatives such as avoiding using the masculine as "neutral", rejecting the hierarchy of genders by not using the masculine when describing a group of mixed gendered people, a person whose gender is unknown, or a nonbinary person. Some strategies include using feminized titles in addition to the generic masculine (professeure et professeur), using a middot to separate the masculine and feminine endings (professeur•e). But these strategies are not fully inclusive of nonbinary people, only of women. By presenting a binary, people who identify outside this binary are not visible. Gender-neutral French, a form of inclusive French, is a way to better respect nonbinary and gender nonconforming French users[2]. New words, (musician rather than musicien or musicienne), are being developed to make nonbinary people visible. See Ashley (2019) for a "proposed system" of gender-neutral French. Kosnick (2019) proposes approaches to avoid the inherent gendering of people in French.

Baros (2019) explores nonbinary student experiences studying Spanish, revealing that "while binary transgender students may not feel language- and culture-specific stressors, nonbinary student identities may be rendered linguistically and culturally impossible" (p. iv). In recent years, nonbinary French has developed a wide variety of language forms to 'get around' the

[2] Throughout this thesis, the term "inclusive French" is used. Other times, "gender-neutral French" is used. The first term encapsulates any efforts to make French more gender inclusive, whereas the second term refers to all forms of French that aim to make nonbinary people visible.

binary grammatical gender system (Kaplan, 2022). French language within francophone communities is evolving to represent expansive understandings of gender identity more accurately (Knisely, 2020; Pilon, 2020; Swamy & Mackenzie, 2019; Ashley, 2019).

Carlini Versini (2021) concludes teaching French grammar in a gender-inclusive way "becomes a negotiation between tradition and innovation" (p. 73). Dumais (2021) argues neutral French has developed separate systems for oral and written use. Diaz Colemenares's (2021) findings of inclusive French on Twitter are in line with the Office Québecois de la Langue Française (OQLF) recommendations, and their lack of a single way of using language is a feature of inclusive French.

Spiegelman (2022) explores the harm caused by misgendering students in French. This author discovers how enforcing strictly binary French in class misgenders nonbinary students, constraining their self-representation. Repeated misgendering undermines safety, increases distress, and drives towards disengagement from learning French. (p. 20). While Gabriel et al. (2018) explores the effect of both inclusive and neutral language on mental representations, they find that binary-gendered forms (generic masculine) consistently create male-biased mental images, whereas nonbinary or neutral wording (pronouns, neutral nouns) increases visibility of gender minority people and often leads to more balanced mental representations. The authors suggest ways for successful implementation of inclusive language strategies. Using inclusive language is a way to communicate a position of allyship to the 2SLGBTQI community (Patev et al., 2019).

More specifically on the ability of teaching French in Ontario classrooms, Kassen et al. (2022) interviews Ontario teachers, some of whom were French teachers. These participants

express difficulty finding appropriate gender-inclusive resources in French. Some teachers blame the Académie, some blame the curriculum.

Gender-Neutral French for Nonbinary People

There is considerably less research on the impacts of these policy and practice choices of gendered language instruction on nonbinary students. Knisely (2020) examines survey data from 80 adult French speakers from France and Canada, showing familiarity with gender-neutral French. Knisely (2022a) finds that teaching gender-just language pedagogies helps students with intersectional thinking, and also reduces their grammatical errors (2022b). Kaplan (2024) uncovers a double invisibility of Francophone and nonbinary identities, and how people who hold these two identities struggle to navigate educational institutions.

The Académie Française discourages both inclusive and neutral French, saying "It is already difficult to acquire a language, what will happen if usage adds secondary and altered forms? How will future generations be able to grow in intimacy with our written heritage?" (2017, my translation). Garbe (2020) examines university student reflections on learning gender-neutral French, and participants understand the challenges this language brings to the table. Garbe concludes:

> As students are constantly bringing a wider variety of identities with them into the language classroom, teachers are having to make changes that might not be standardized in order to make sure that every student is made visible. It is not an easy process, but it is not impossible, and it most certainly is a necessity. (p. 35)

However, there are other published sources of views from students themselves. They may lack academic rigour, but include authenticity. Dante (an 18-year-old trans* french student) created "Iel: A zine on gender-affirming language for the French classroom" (n.d.). It is a handwritten

graphic on the importance of gender-inclusive French language in schools. In the section titled "Student labor," Dante explained:

> It is exhausting when I have to educate my classmates or teacher on why gender-affirming language is important to my ability to learn. Please don't force non-binary kids to educate you or the class on their identity – instead, one-on-one check-ins & working with the student's support network (ie other teachers or a trusted adult) can help lessen a non-binary student's burden of self-advocacy!

This sentiment is supported by Chen et al. (2022), who highlights the importance of TGNC youth having adults advocating for them.

Grant (2025) notes how queer FSL teachers reported no formal preparation for inclusive French, leaving the responsibility to the individual teacher to take initiative and self-teach inclusive vocabulary and pronouns. This was done in the face of stakeholder pushback, which signals the need for explicit inclusive French training in curriculum and teacher training programs. One Ontario teacher in Thibeault & Maynard's 2022 study explains their interactions with a nonbinary student in their French class. The teacher was struggling to understand what language to use with this student, but eventually, "**He** told me **he** will adopt the "ol" pronoun, and **he** will write in the masculine because that's how **he** wants to identify in his texts" (p. 33) (my translation and emphasis). The entire sentence was written using the masculine pronoun "il," rather than the requested "ol." Clearly, gender-neutral French is making its way into Ontario schools, but the teachers require additional support to implement it in a gender-affirming way.

Grant et al. (2024) examines Ontario's grades 9-12 FSL curriculum and determined it presents inclusive rhetoric but mostly erases queer, trans, and nonbinary language. The curriculum was found to reinforce a binary through grammatical-social gender conflation and male-first forms,

and even reduces “inclusion” to a token mention of the pronoun “on.” The authors argue this all points to the need for explicit inclusive French expectations and support for teachers implementing this language into classrooms. Grant et al. (2024) and Grant (2025) both assist in improving the understanding of the barriers teachers identified in teaching inclusive French, the effects of curriculum, and absence of leadership in changing how teachers are taught. Absent is the perspective of students on all these forces - the policy choices, curriculum choices, teacher education programs and teacher choices. Many nonbinary students have completed French-language instruction in Ontario, generally without gender inclusivity. Their perspective on how French was taught, and its impact on identity, safety and inclusion is largely absent.

This research is designed to address the intersection of all of these issues, examining the impact and challenges faced by nonbinary students when dealing with the policy and practical choices of gendered language instruction in Ontario public schools. Further, scholars have requested further research in this area. Knisely (2020) requests “Alongside the deepening of knowledge about NB language, classroom studies on the teaching and learning of NB forms will be critical for advancing inclusive practices” (p. 873). In their 2020a study, Knisely emphasizes how “Continued research is needed to explore how this linguistic and cultural self-positioning evolves alongside ongoing societal developments in how gender is articulated and read as well as to extend this research to additional Francophone contexts” (p. 187). What such existing literature demonstrates then, is that gender, language, and schooling intersect in ways that materially shape the lives of transgender and gender nonconforming students. Policies gesture toward inclusion but often fall short in offering meaningful guidance for one’s teaching practices. Moreover, while curricula present aspirations of equity it continues to simultaneously reinforce binary linguistic

grammatical structures. In turn, teachers themselves report limited preparation, inconsistent resources, and a reliance on self-directed learning to navigate such tensions.

At the same time, research across linguistics, sociological, and educational research demonstrates that the stakes of gendered language are profound, and in turn influence a student's sense of visibility, safety, and belonging. What remains underexamined in such research is how different structural forces—curriculum expectations, policy choices, and institutional discourses—interact with the lived experiences of TGNC students who must learn, and call for recognition through, a language that often cannot name them. To make sense of these layered dynamics put forth in the literature review, I draw on a queer theoretical framework to help interpret how power, discourse, and recognition circulate in French language classrooms and within the broader educational systems that shape them. The next section outlines the theoretical concepts that guide this study and illuminate how TGNC students navigate, resist, and reimagine the linguistic and institutional conditions of their schooling.

Theoretical Framework

Gender identity is a social construct, not a biological binary. Queer theory challenges the rigid categories of man and woman, arguing these categories limit human experience. It critiques cisnormativity: the assumption that cisgender people are the default or the "normal" way to exist. Using queer as a verb, to "queer" something is to question and disrupt its assumed norms and binaries. Queer theory denies the belief that humans have one fixed identity. Identity, especially gender identity, is fluid, and is shaped by culture, power, and language. Queer theory is frequently used to analyze the status quo such as social categories, binary systems, and most applicable to this research, language. These social categories are all created, regulated, and bounded by language, and any attempt to diverge from the "norm" is immediately positioned as "deviant"

(Sumara, 2001, p. 2). Who decides what is "normal"? What happens when we do not fit into the categories presented in the language we are learning? This research aimed to interrogate all normative and non-normative acts, identities, and possibilities that exist and are confined by the French-language-learning classroom.

Many authors have researched the integration of queer theory in curriculum- and learning-focused contexts (Sunderland, 2012; Staley & Leonardi, 2016; Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Greteman, 2017; Schey, 2021, 2022; Broadway, 2021; Sykes, 2011). The use of queer theory in educational research has thus far focused on queer-inclusive pedagogical materials and practices, as well as teacher and teacher-in-training (dis)comfort in addressing queerness in their classrooms (Staley & Leonardi, 2016; Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Schey, 2021; Murray, 2015). Some researchers, such as Knisely (2022a, 2022b) and Kosnick (2022), have begun to explore the intricacies of incorporating queer, feminist, and non-binary-affirming inclusivity in French classes, as trans-affirming queer inquiry-based pedagogies (TAQIBPs) in French-language-learning environments. More pointedly, a dissertation by Boland (2021) explores the use of professional development for intermediate French educators, attempting to resolve the frequent teacher discomfort in addressing queerness and gender non-conformity in a binary language. Little research has been published on educator and administrator awareness of gender-neutral French language, nor the experiences of gender-diverse French language learners in Ontario.

This thesis uses queer theory to question the norms of French-language education in Ontario, as well as center the experiences of GNC students and understand gender non-conformity within the confines of social gender in the French language. Queer theory allows for critique of not just the lack of representation of gender-neutral identities in the French language, but also the linguistic structure itself that excludes GNC people. Using queer theory, this research examined

how curriculum, pedagogy, and policy reinforce cisnormativity and binary gender norms. By asking recent students about their time in French classrooms, the lived experience is amplified – a value of queer theory. Participants shared how they navigated, resisted, and reimagined gendered language in the classroom. Their experiences explore how schools uphold cisnormativity in subtle and explicit ways, such as how students were pressured to conform linguistically. This research touches on the ways students are forced to perform gender through French grammar choices, relating to Butler's idea of performativity (Butler, 1990). Students shared their relationship to the instructional practices of French-language pedagogy in their classrooms. Educational institutions, classrooms, and schools have assigned themselves the responsibility of socializing students, with teachers responsible for the instruction of common sense in their social communities (Sumara, 2001, p. 4). These rules are communicated through classroom social participation expectations, assessments, curriculum, and policy. This research unveils recent awareness, use, and impacts of inclusive French language in anglophone school boards and classrooms among GNC students. The interviews encouraged participants to share interactions with administrators, educators, and peers.

Throughout history, various social justice initiatives have made their way into classrooms. Culturally responsive pedagogy, anti-racist education, and 2SLGBTQI representation in classroom materials have all gained momentum in recent years. These social justice initiatives started by investigating and problematizing norms presented in classrooms. By queering teaching practices, educational stakeholders identify who is represented and included in the current practice and who is not, what gaps exist in the current ways of teaching and current curriculum and policies, and finally suggest ways to address those gaps. This research articulates who is not currently included in Ontario public anglophone French classrooms and describes the gaps in current pedagogical and curricular practices. Queer theory helped to inform the ways language development of gender-

neutral and inclusive forms are expansive, varied, and nebulous in nature. Queer theory posits that our world is not binary, and therefore our language instruction should reflect the ever-expanding understanding of gender identities, without pressure to develop or reveal a singular, one-size-fits-all solution. Queer has many centers, and no single life, teaching, or learning experience will be the same (Giffney, 2004, p. 74). As this research is based on understanding the ways language instruction can reinforce cis-normativity, queer theory helped to illuminate this social and pedagogical inequity.

Queer theory helps educators question how cisnormativity plays a role in learning and teaching (Sumara, 2001; Murray, 2015). Interviews with recent French students who identify as gender nonconforming inherently problematizes the notion that all who speak French identify within the gender binary. As French grammar often presents a gender binary, the narratives shared by GNC participants helped to understand their self-positioning within and outside of a binary-gendered language. Questions pertaining to their experiences with their French teachers helped understand the degree to which those educators have questioned the binary-gendered nature of the language they instruct. Other questions pertaining to school administration and larger power structures present in school, as well as school-wide policies and practices unveiled the different Ontario school board understandings of the effects of cisnormativity in French classrooms and illuminated the current efforts from various school boards to address this gap in GNC visibility in the classroom.

Queer theory is often used to problematize norms and current educational practices. For those engaged in French-language education—policymakers, teachers, and students—these normativities play a significant role in how the French language is taught and experienced.

Research Methodology

This educational research thesis project began by drawing on case study methodology. Within education, case studies are used as a tool to closely examine learning environments and their social complexities, all while maintaining the community's distinct context (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013; Abes, 2008). This study ultimately draws on qualitative inquiry informed by elements of case study logic, critical discourse analysis, and narrative inquiry. As the lines of evidence developed throughout the research process, this study evolved into a broader qualitative study (Creswell & Guetterman 2019; Denzin et al, 2006). The overall qualitative focus of this thesis is on the lived experiences of six gender nonconforming individuals, considered within the larger context of how French is taught in Ontario's anglophone public high schools. This research applies a queer methodological lens, aiming to avoid presenting findings as universally representative of GNC students across the province.

The "case" of Ontario gender-diverse students attending public school was explored using two phases of research. The first phase included an analysis of inclusive educational policy regarding gender inclusivity in anglophone public schools in Ontario. Understanding how gender inclusivity has been addressed up until now through policy will help lay the foundation for movements for curricular implementations of similar inclusive efforts. An analysis of the Ontario public French curricula spanning 2000-2023 was conducted to evaluate the current issues related to GNC inclusion in French classrooms, as well as contextualize the experiences of the participants during the second phase of research. Four of the 32 Ontario public anglophone school boards had a policy, procedure, or guideline that was publicly available on the board's website that mentioned the existence of gender-neutral French language. The following documents were collected for analysis:

1. *Ontario grade 9 and 10 (1999) and grade 11 and 12 (2000) French curriculum*
2. *Ontario French curriculum (2014)*
3. Durham District School Board *Human Rights Inclusive Design and Accommodation Procedure (2022)*
4. Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board *Gender Identity and Gender Expression Procedure: Students (2023)*
5. Ottawa Carleton District School Board *Gender Identity and Gender Expression: Fostering inclusive learning environments for all students Policy (2021)*
6. Renfrew County District School Board *Gender Identity and Gender Expression Guideline (2022)*.

It is possible other school boards have relevant policies that were not discovered during this research. This research study analyzes the differences between the 1999/2000 FSL Ontario curriculum and the 2013/2014 FSL Ontario curriculum. Other studies, such as Grant et al (2024), provide insight into the ways the 2014 grades 9-12 Ontario FSL curriculum is excluding queer, trans, and nonbinary people. This thesis, however, also focuses on the curriculum document in place before the 2014 update. This thesis also focuses exclusively on the representation and visibility of nonbinary and gender nonconforming people in the curriculum. Another point of difference between this thesis and the Grant et al. (2024) article is the analysis of Ontario public school board policy and their mentions of inclusive French. This thesis seeks to examine how the curriculum changed, and how the policies reflect or do not reflect the curriculum in place.

Phase two was more involved. Participants were recruited to take part in a semi-structured interview exploring their experiences as gender nonconforming students in Ontario anglophone public high schools. The goal was to recruit eight to ten 18–25-year-olds who identify as nonbinary

or gender nonconforming in some way. The participants had to be able to speak English fluently, for me to conduct the interviews in English. They must have taken at least one French (FSL) course in a public Ontario anglophone high school, either Core, Extended, or Immersion. Participants were selected on a first-come, first-served basis. The recruitment materials (Appendix A) were posted in online spaces specific to trans and nonbinary communities, and to the Ontario community. Snowball sampling was also used, by asking anyone who completed the interview to share the information directly with anyone they knew who might qualify. To encourage participation, the poster mentioned a $25 gift card as compensation. Since this study was recruiting online, the researcher received a high volume of responses, most of which were difficult to verify their legitimacy. Despite this, every inquiry was pursued, but during the interviews it was clear that many did not qualify. Some individuals revealed they had never attended school in Ontario, let alone Canada, resulting in disqualification. Others initially used a gender identity label within the binary, and when informed they did not qualify, changed their label still within the binary, leading to their exclusion. An added difficulty was the intended use of camera and chat functions during the online interviews. Camera was made optional, and chat was encouraged depending on safety and comfort of the participants in their space. These measures were put in place to hopefully reduce fears that participants' identities would be judged based on appearance or voice. These well-meaning efforts to prioritize participant comfort made it more difficult to distinguish qualifying participants.

During March of 2023, my abstract was accepted to present at the Lavender Languages Conference during the Work In Progress session. I shared my research with scholars from all over the world who study the impacts of language on the 2SLGBTQI community. I specifically requested support with recruiting, as I only had 3 participants at that point. The feedback was

incredible, and I left the session with a stronger recruitment plan. This plan involved an online screening questionnaire, an edited poster (Appendix B) and a shorter recruitment blurb (Appendix C). This plan also involved making connections to university and college 2SLGBTQI groups and sharing my recruitment materials to be dispersed amongst their community. These strategies helped to double my eligible participants, and I was able to complete my recruitment just shy of the eight participants originally sought.

The semi-structured interviews (guide - Appendix D) were explored using Critical Discourse Analysis, which illuminates how language reflects social inequalities and power imbalances (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). The interview transcripts were read several times to build familiarity, and the interview recordings were listened to multiple times to focus on tone and phrasing. Key moments in the interviews were identified based on their relevance or ability to answer the research questions. Other moments were collected when they provided suggestions for improving French education for gender nonconforming students. These moments were grouped into broad categories, such as a language barrier, teacher or administrative response, experiences of exclusion etc. The analysis paid close attention to how the participants described their experiences, whether with their own identity development, navigating language constraints, or interactions with others. I prioritized the voices of participants, created space for them to express themselves and shape their identities by storytelling. Queer theory helped to understand the participant retellings of instructional practices in classrooms, and their experiences with forceful instruction of cisgender-centric, social-gender binary and masculine dominant norms in the French language.

Summary of Articles

This thesis explores the ways inclusive French language is being addressed in Ontario public anglophone French classrooms, as well as the ways inclusive French makes students feel visible, included, and safe in their French classrooms. These two topics are addressed across two articles. The first article analyzes Ontario French curriculum documents (old and new), and four Ontario public anglophone gender identity policies, procedures, and guidelines using critical discourse analysis. In 2014, there was a change in Ontario French curriculum documents. Both were collected and analyzed to understand if that change made space for gender diverse students. The curriculum revealed some, although limited, space for gender diversity to be considered in the French classroom, but ultimately still presented a gender binary. The school board documents related to the instruction of and presence of inclusive French in their schools revealed positive steps towards gender inclusivity in the French classroom. Only four out of 32 school boards mention the existence of inclusive French. The school board policies reveal that there is an indication that gender-neutral French language is becoming more topical. The curriculum documents need to be updated to reflect this fact.

The second article examines the experiences shared by six 18-25-year-old recent graduates of Ontario anglophone public French classes. These six participants all identified as gender nonconforming in some way and had taken at least one French course in high school. The interviews explored French class experiences as a gender nonconforming person, gender-inclusive and gender-neutral French language, and feelings of safety, visibility, and inclusion in the French classroom. None of the participants were formally taught inclusive French but had all learned about the gender-neutral pronoun “iel” through informal sources. Students shared their inability to be who they were due to a lack of linguistic options presented to them in French. Participants also shared ways they thought the public anglophone French program in Ontario could improve to be

genuinely inclusive of gender nonconforming people. This article shares findings from this critical discourse analyzed documents.

Article 1

Teachers' Obligations to Deliver Trans-Affirming French-Language Instruction

> *"It is important that students be connected to the curriculum; that they see themselves in what is taught, how it is taught, and how it applies to the world at large." (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 3)*

Recent political movements across the country have shed light on the ways transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) students are at risk in educational environments. Parental rights movements in Saskatchewan (Egale, 2023) Alberta (Egale, 2024a), and New Brunswick (Egale, 2024b) have focused on policies requiring schools to obtain parental or guardian consent before school staff can use a student's chosen name or pronouns. These policies jeopardize TGNC student safety, human rights, and mental health (Khonina & Salway, 2024). The political climate in the United States is currently more severe. In January of 2025, the U.S. president signed an executive order that declares that there is no such thing as gender, and that there are only two biological sexes (ACLU, 2024). In the same month, the president signed another executive order ending federal-funded gender-affirming care and stopping gender-related medical procedures for everyone, including TGNC youth (Faguy, 2025; Miller & Mulvihill, 2025). The State Department now enforces that the gender marker on passports and travel documents must align with their sex assigned at birth (Diaz, 2025). When the existence of gender diversity is threatened or questioned, the issue of how language use should be optimized to best respect that is at risk of becoming much

less important. In contrast, Canadian policymakers have yet to reverse course on policies that aim to recognize and respect issues specific to the TGNC Ontario community.

Language shapes how people are recognized, named, understood, and welcomed to classroom communities by others in our society. For TGNC communities, linguistic categories that erase or constrain gender identities reproduce harm (Zimman, 2016). As visibility and public awareness of TGNC youth increase, languages in turn must evolve to reflect the full range of our human experiences. The French language remains grammatically binary language with conventions—from pronouns to adjective agreement—that historically privilege a cisgender, masculine-default language (Michard, 1996). Although feminist linguistic reforms since the 1970s have challenged aspects of this dominance (Ashley, 2018; Kosnick, 2021; Knisely, 2020), it remains unclear how these developments are represented in Ontario's anglophone French as a Second Language (FSL) programs. Understanding this gap is important because language instruction is often the first institutional site where students learn what is considered "appropriate" language. In the case of French, when talking about students generally, a teacher would use the masculine "étudiants" (rather than étudiants et étudiantes, or étudiant.es) because of the long-held tradition of masculine dominance in the French language. Recent social justice movements amongst Francophone communities have developed more inclusive language to better represent feminine-identifying and gender non-conforming-identifying French-speaking people (Office québécois de la langue française, n.d.; Fédération nationale des enseignantes et des enseignants du Québec, 2024). These efforts include using the feminine and the masculine forms of words or using a middot such as étudiant.es to represent more genders.

In response, in what way(s) do Ontario FSL curriculum documents and anglophone public school board policies address, constrain, or enable gender-inclusive French? In turn, what

implications do these texts hold for TGNC student inclusion? These guiding questions situate the study within broader concerns about how school systems mediate gender recognition, belonging, and safety. In other words, how do Ontario's French as a Second Language curriculum and school board policies enable, constrain, or overlook the use of gender-neutral and gender-inclusive French in public education? To investigate this research question, Ontario French curriculum documents, including both the 1999–2000 versions and the 2014 curriculum update, were analyzed, along with the gender identity and expression policies, procedures, and guidelines of four anglophone public boards. Together, these texts offer insight into how institutional actors define "appropriate" uses of French as a second language, who is imagined as a legitimate language user, and when (if ever) inclusive forms are sanctioned.

Positioning My Beginnings Toward a Solution

Since learning about inclusive French language in 2018, I pursued a Bachelor of Education at Western University to become a music and French teacher. I started by teaching my cohort of French teachers about inclusive language and gender-neutral language options. My instructor invited me to lecture to her French teaching candidates for a few years afterwards while I lived in London. I continued to the University of Ottawa for my masters in education, researching the importance of inclusive French language. I have been invited to speak in numerous public anglophone classrooms across Southern Ontario about gender diversity, 2SLGBTQI identity and expression, and inclusive French language. I have conducted 2SLGBTQI inclusivity and sensitivity training to organizations within my community. Sharing my experience as a nonbinary person having gone through the Ontario public anglophone French immersion system allows school communities to learn about ways they can continue to learn about practicing allyship towards the trans and nonbinary community. Having the opportunity to educate others about the

existence of gender-neutral French language, while time consuming at approximately one hour in length, my goal is to plant a seed in the minds of those listening to my story. Further, if anyone in these sessions knows someone or encounters someone who is TGNC, they too can be respectfully addressed. My community engagement efforts are an attempt to bring attention to this language and be loud enough that those listening realize this is not a simple pronoun issue, or something to address only after someone outs themselves and requests a specific accommodation, or something to address exclusively during pride month.

Literature Review: TGNC Inclusion, Language, and Educational Policy

Growing societal recognition of TGNC rights has prompted significant shifts in policy and public discourse, yet these shifts have not consistently translated into meaningful inclusion in schools. In Ontario, the Human Rights Code protects individuals from discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression, noting that the persistent refusal to use affirming language constitutes a form of harassment (OHRC, 2012). Although some school boards have introduced preventative policies intended to support TGNC students (Kirkup et al., 2020), research repeatedly shows that TGNC youth continue to experience systemic barriers, including misgendering, harassment, and violence in educational settings (Bower-Brown et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2019; Grant et al., 2024; Ingrey, 2012; Martino et al., 2019, 2020; Omercajic & Martino, 2020; Paechter et al., 2021). Scholars across gender studies and critical policy studies argue that policies alone rarely ensure safety or accountability, particularly when institutions fail to address the structural conditions that produce harm (Kirkup et al., 2020; Spade, 2015).

Demographic evidence underscores why inclusive practices matter. The 2021 Canadian census reported more than 100,000 transgender and nonbinary people nationally, with nonbinary youth representing a significant portion of this population (Easton, 2022). Just over 40% of that

figure is made up of nonbinary or other gender nonconforming-identifying people. More specifically, 0.29% of that figure represent nonbinary youth aged 15-19 (Easton, 2022). The question regarding gender identity was answered voluntarily, and the census only reports on those aged 15 years or older, therefore this figure is simply an estimate to represent those who felt safe to identify themselves as gender nonconforming. Moreover, the census itself demonstrates how language still constrains such recognition. For example, both sex assigned at birth and gender identity questions were limited to “masculin” and “féminin” in French, grammatical terms, that do not align with many TGNC respondents lived identities (Statistics Canada, 2020, p. 7-8). The technical report noted that fewer francophone respondents identified as nonbinary, without acknowledging the restrictive linguistic framing of the French questionnaire. These omissions signal persistent institutional challenges. For example, while gender diversity exists in Canada’s youth population, the French-language instruments and systems frequently fail to name or reflect it within official governmental records. This disconnect is mirrored in schools, where students who are not taught inclusive French as a second language often have no linguistic option but to misgender themselves or their peers.

Schools, in theory, should serve as spaces that model equity, diversity, and inclusion. In practice, however, classroom and school environments have the potential to reproduce cisnormativity. Research shows that 2SLGBTQI students avoid gendered spaces such as bathrooms, changerooms, and extracurricular activities (Kosciew et al., 2016), and that teachers may unintentionally reinforce heteronormativity and cisnormativity through their everyday practices (Meyer et al., 2015; Menzies & Santoro, 2018). Other studies highlight that TGNC students must often “come out” to access rights nominally guaranteed by policy (Martino et al., 2020), while teacher candidates often express a strong sense of social justice without yet

possessing the tools to enact it (Pantić et al., 2019). Together, this research illustrates the structural and interpersonal barriers that shape TGNC students' experiences long before curriculum comes into play.

Gender-inclusive language practices remain one of the most tangible ways educators can create safer and more affirming spaces for TGNC students. Yet, as several scholars observe, much of the existing guidance around implementing gender-affirming language has been shaped through an Anglocentric lens that does not account for the grammatical realities of French (Hord, 2016). In French-language classrooms, particularly anglophone FSL contexts, educators must therefore grapple with a linguistic system structured around binary teachings of gender. This grammatical binary structure not only limits what can be expressed but also reinforces cisgender-centric ideologies (Coady, 2018; Motschenbacher, 2016). Kosnick (2019) and Knisely (2020) illustrate how traditional instructional practices in anglophone French programs continue to marginalize TGNC students precisely because they rely on generic masculine forms framed as "neutral," forms that have long been critiqued for embedding historical sexism and erasing gender diversity.

Despite these constraints, French is evolving in many francophone and multilingual contexts. Contemporary communities increasingly experiment with and adopt gender-inclusive and gender-neutral linguistic forms (Knisely, 2020; Pilon, 2020; Swamy & Mackenzie, 2019; Ashley, 2019). Teachers themselves have begun to challenge long-standing conventions: a public petition signed by more than 314 French teachers worldwide rejected the rule requiring generic masculine forms to address mixed-gender groups, a movement that has since gathered over 35,000 signatures (Viennot, 2017). Nonbinary French speakers in Canada already demonstrate fluency with neopronouns, epicene forms, and inclusive orthographies (Knisely, 2020), underscoring that these linguistic innovations are not abstract proposals, but rather active features of lived

francophone practice. Globally, researchers in applied linguistics and world-language education have explored classroom strategies for integrating such forms (Peters, 2020; Gabriel et al., 2018; Kosnick, 2019; Meyer et al., 2016; Manconi & Sheeren, 2020), further demonstrating that gender-inclusive pedagogy is both possible and pedagogically sound.

And still, the persistence of binary norms in formal second language curricula continues to shape what students encounter. In the case of FSL (the focus of this article), analysis conducted by Grant, Masson and Carroll (2024) highlight the disconnect between French and inclusive language in the FSL curriculum documents:

> curriculum expectations and teacher prompts supported the creation of gender binaries and the presence of gender – either through grammatical, social or their conflation – sought to maintain a French language rigidity, consistently reinforcing that gender was binary and fixed, and in turn, implicates students' language learning. (p. 231)

Scholars in gender-expansive education underline similar dynamics across world-language classrooms. Research in Spanish FSL and university-level French courses shows that students often recognize the gap between linguistic forms taught in school and the inclusive practices circulating in their communities (Baros, 2019; Garbe, 2020). Studies examining comprehension and attitudes toward inclusive language suggest that gender-neutral forms do not hinder learning; instead, they expand students' interpretive frameworks and challenge restrictive constructions of gender (Tibblin, 2020; Sauntson, 2019). Importantly, inclusive language use is correlated with positive attitudes toward TGNC people and in turn affects how students imagine gendered subjects more broadly (Patev et al., 2019). Brauer (2008) demonstrated that when prompts were written in the masculine generic, participants interpreted only 23% of subjects as feminine, compared to 43% when questions used gender-neutral forms, which is further evidence that the masculine cannot

function as a true neutral. More critically, the Trevor Project (2020) reported that participating TGNC youth whose pronouns were respected by "all or most" people in their lives had attempted suicide at half the rate of those whose pronouns were not respected, highlighting the life-saving potential of affirming language practices.

In response, the purpose of this paper is to contextualize curriculum and policy in relation to the following educational context: An Ontario anglophone secondary French as a second language classroom. The purpose is also to evaluate how Ontario educational institutions are encouraging teachers to teach inclusive French language through curriculum and policy (if at all), and how public anglophone schools are addressing TGNC students in French-language documents. This research explores the 2014 update to the Ontario French curriculum, as well as the current policies, procedures, and guidelines in place in Ontario public anglophone school boards to face this issue.

Taken together, this body of research demonstrates both the pedagogical and ethical urgency of integrating gender-inclusive French into schools. This conclusion directly informs the forthcoming analysis of Ontario's curriculum and school-board policies. The next section examines whether these documents enable, constrain, or remain silent on the linguistic possibilities outlined above, and considers how such silences shape the educational landscape for TGNC students.

Policy Landscape – Understanding the Educational Conditions

This study employed a document analysis situated within broader qualitative methodology. This study began using case study research, which is well established in educational contexts and is particularly useful for examining complex social phenomena within bounded settings (Hamilton & Corbett-Whittier, 2013). By concentrating on curricular and policy texts, this article examines

the institutional discourses that shape teachers' obligations, available linguistic practices, and the parameters of inclusion. Although this study began with case study methodology in mind, as the lines of evidence unfolded, this study became broadly qualitative in nature.

The first phase of this study involved gathering Ontario anglophone public schoolboard level policies, procedures, and guidelines related to gender identity, gender expression, and inclusive practice. Of the 32 anglophone public boards in Ontario, only four had written policies that referenced gender-neutral or gender-inclusive French language. These included:

- The Durham District School Board's Human Rights: Inclusive Design and Accommodation Procedure (2022);
- The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board's Gender Identity and Gender Expression Procedure: Students (2023);
- The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board's Gender Identity and Gender Expression: Fostering Inclusive Learning Environments for All Students (2021); and
- The Renfrew County District School Board's Gender Identity and Gender Expression Guideline (2022).

Alongside these, three provincial curriculum documents formed part of the dataset: The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9–10: French as a Second Language – Core, Extended, and Immersion French (1999); The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 11–12: French as a Second Language (2000); and the updated Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9–12: French as a Second Language (2014). As some non-sexist French grammar initiatives began in the 1990s (Labrosse 1996), both previous and current curriculum documents were examined to evaluate whether the change in documents had any evidence of influence by a growing gender-inclusive grammar movement. Together, these policy documents formed the corpus for the second phase of the study, which involved a detailed

analysis and synthesis of provincial and board-level discourses. This phase examined how each document framed, and/or failed to frame gender-inclusive French, the role of teachers, and the meaning of inclusion within a linguistically gendered system. The aim was not to evaluate individual boards but rather to trace broader discursive patterns across institutions. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) guided this analytic process. CDA helps uncover the interplay of language and power, in this case in the written policy texts. It is often used to critique social inequalities. CDA involves analyzing word choice, phrasing, and framing that all work to construct identities and power structures. It also involves studying which voices are encouraged to speak, and which voices are excluded. According to Richards and Schmidt (2010), discourse, which they define as larger units of language, is used in CDA to identify meanings and values embedded in talk (p. 174). The same authors describe CDA as a form of analysis that

> takes a critical stance towards how language is used and analyzes texts and other discourse types in order to identify the ideology and values underlying them. It seeks to reveal the interests and power relations in any institutional and socio-historical context through analyzing the ways that people use language. (p. 145)

The pedagogical aim of CDA is one of emancipation, to focus on issues faced by the oppressed (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 124). As CDA considers institutional and social discourses, this method of data analysis helps make sense of the educational context surrounding gender diversity, French-language pedagogy, and shifting cultural norms. CDA has been widely used by sociolinguists in education since the 1970s, yet Rogers et al. (2016) note that fewer than 10% of CDA studies explicitly address gender or sexuality (p. 1199). This analysis hopes to contribute more to this body of research by applying CDA to questions of TGNC inclusion in curriculum and policy. Scholars such as but not limited to Taylor (2004) and Liasidou (2008) have demonstrated how

CDA can illuminate equity issues and the human rights implications embedded within institutional texts, further supporting its relevance for examining how FSL curriculum and school board policies construct, constrain, or erase gender diversity.

This approach is also methodologically consistent with, but analytically distinct from, *Unravelling the Silence Around Gender and Sexuality in a Second Language Curriculum* by Grant, Masson, and Carroll (2024). While these authors employed critical discourse analysis to interrogate how provincial FSL curriculum constructs and maintains gender binaries through expectations and teacher prompts, the present analysis extends this work by looking beyond provincial policy to include local schoolboard level policy documents. By analyzing board policies alongside the curriculum, this study considers an additional layer of institutional discourse, one that directly shapes teachers' legal and ethical responsibilities regarding gender identity and expression. This expanded focus helps illustrate not only what the province mandates but also how local educational school communities and their leadership interpret, reinforce, or leave unaddressed the linguistic possibilities available to TGNC students.

Discursive Constructions of "Appropriate" French and the Implications for TGNC Students

This section analyzes how both the pre-2014 and post-2014 FSL curriculum documents construct gender through the language structures they identify as normative, and how such constructions constrain students' capacity to "see themselves" in the curriculum, as the Ministry requires.

In the Grade 9 and 10 (1999) and Grade 11 and 12 (2000) Ontario French curriculum documents, the word "appropriate" appears repeatedly. In every grade level, the Oral

Communication and Writing strands include expectations such as "use appropriate language conventions" or "use appropriate language structures." At first glance, such directives seem pedagogically neutral. Yet a closer look at the curriculum's own examples demonstrates that "appropriate" largely means masculine-dominant. For instance, the Grade 9 Core French language structures chart specifies: "singular and plural, feminine and masculine, of irregular adjectives (e.g., frais, gentil, gros, créatif, cher, sérieux)" (Ontario French as a Second Language Curriculum, 1999, p. 15).[3] Although the expectation references both feminine and masculine forms, the examples include only masculine adjectives. This pattern positions the masculine as the default, reiterating the longstanding linguistic principle "le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin" (the masculine takes precedence over the feminine). Feminine forms appear only when the morphology differs significantly from the masculine, reinforcing their status as secondary or exceptional.

A similar pattern appears in the verbs section of the same chart, which specifies: "passé composé of verbs conjugated with être (e.g., rester, arriver) including the agreement of the past participle (e.g., Elle est restée tard à l'école)" (Ontario French as a Second Language Curriculum, 1999, p. 15). Here, feminine agreement is included, but only as a deviation from the prototypical masculine form. Nowhere do these documents present gender-neutral or inclusive options. By calling the listed structures "appropriate," the curriculum implicitly risks characterizing any alternative linguistic form as inappropriate. This includes the very language—such as "iel" or other neutral forms—that TGNC students may require to be recognized accurately.

The use of "appropriate" also raises important questions about the consequences for students who request gender-neutral pronouns or who need to refer to themselves using language not sanctioned by the curriculum. By relying on the curriculum's definition of appropriate

[3] Core French refers to French classes taken by anglophone students, where their only course in French is French. In French immersion programs, many other courses, such as science and history, are also taught in French.

structures, one could propose that teachers could they interpret gender-inclusive French as incorrect, inappropriate, or out of scope. Such interpretations would not only contravene students' rights under the Ontario Human Rights Code but could also inflict harm by compelling students to misgender themselves and others. Moreover, the curriculum provides no guidance on how teachers should respond when students lived linguistic needs extend beyond the confines of the grade-level charts.

The French language is often taught in Ontario in a way that represents only a gender binary. In most public school French classrooms, the pronouns "il" and "elle" are presented as the only appropriate options, reinforcing a linguistic system that recognizes only two genders. The Ontario French curriculum has historically sanctioned this practice, constructing a narrow set of "acceptable" linguistic forms that exclude gender-expansive possibilities. As outlined in earlier sections, TGNC students across the province increasingly encounter inclusive French outside of school, raising important questions about how curriculum shapes visibility, belonging, and access to affirming language. These curricular silences become even more pronounced when viewed alongside the curriculum's own commitments to relevance. Across the 1999, 2000, and 2014 FSL curriculum policy iterations, in the front matter, the Ministry asserts that "To make the curriculum relevant to students' lives, knowledge and skills are taught in contexts that reflect their interests and experiences" (Ontario French as a Second Language Curriculum, 2000, p. 2). In theory, such statements could be interpreted as encouragement of pedagogy that applies to students' lived experiences. In practice, however, relevance is often interpreted narrowly and typically taken up as incorporating popular culture references or topics aligned with student hobbies. Rarely is relevance understood to include affirming students' identities (gender or otherwise – see Grant et al., 2024) or providing linguistic tools to articulate them. Yet the FSL curriculum itself claims that

learning tasks should "apply their knowledge of French in situations that are meaningful to them" (Ontario French as a Second Language Curriculum, 1999, p. 4). For TGNC students, few things are more meaningful than having the language to name oneself and to be recognized accurately by peers and teachers.

The 2014 curriculum update introduced more explicit language around inclusion, well-being, and visibility. The front matter states: "It is important that students be connected to the curriculum; that they see themselves in what is taught, how it is taught, and how it applies to the world at large" (Ontario Curriculum Grades 9–12: French as a Second Language, 2014, p. 3). While this framing suggests an increased responsiveness to diversity, the curriculum again fails to acknowledge gender-inclusive linguistic options that could connect students to the curriculumin the way they describe. Students who identify as nonbinary cannot "see themselves" in a curriculum that offers only "il" and "elle." Nor can students who expect to encounter TGNC people in the broader francophone world be adequately prepared to communicate respectfully and accurately. Teaching only binary forms implicitly denies the existence of gender diversity in francophone communities and signals to students that such identities are peripheral or invisible.

Further on the same page, the curriculum emphasizes "healthy, caring, safe, inclusive, and accepting" learning environments (p. 3). It lists gender as a determinant of health and acknowledges that mental health is shaped by social conditions. Yet immediately afterward, the curriculum reinforces a gender binary by using the pronouns "he or she," reinscribing the very binary that its inclusive language gestures attempt to transcend: "Together, such factors influence not only whether a person is physically healthy but also the extent to which he or she will have the physical, social, and personal resources needed to cope and to identify and achieve personal aspirations" (OME, 2014). This contradiction highlights a broader tension within this FSL

curriculum document: while it recognizes gender identity as relevant to student well-being, it provides no linguistic resources to support gender-affirming communication.

The FSL curriculum's most explicit discussion of inclusion appears much later in the 2014 document in the section on equity, inclusive education, and healthy relationships. The opening sentence affirms: "Every student is entitled to learn in a safe, caring environment, free from violence and harassment" (p. 44). Again, under the Ontario Human Rights Code, repeated misgendering constitutes a form of harassment. Teaching only binary pronouns and grammatical structures effectively trains students to misgender TGNC peers, teachers, and community members. In this sense, the curriculum not only fails to prevent harm but actively creates a framework to puport it.

The same section states: "In an environment based on the principles of inclusive education, all students, parents, caregivers, and other members of the school community – regardless of […] gender identity […] or other similar factors – are welcomed, included, treated fairly and respected" (OME, 2014, p. 45). Given the findings presented above, upholding this commitment is not part of the FSL curriculum given the binary linguistic system presented as fundamental to building French competence. A curriculum that sanctions binary French prevents teachers from respecting gender identities that fall outside that binary. For TGNC students, these contradictions produce a profound disconnect: the curriculum promises respect, but the language required to practice such respect is denied recognition ir space in that same curriculum. .

The 2014 update did introduce stronger acknowledgement of gender identity and mental health within the learning environment. However, it did not address the ways that French grammar itself, particularly as taught through the generic masculine, can undermine the very acknowledgement of gender identity they are promoting. By continuing to present only masculine

and feminine forms as legitimate linguistic possibilities that must be taught in FSL classrooms, the updated curriculum reinforces a limited model of gender that is misaligned with the realities of Ontario's school communities. The FSL curriculum's silence on inclusive French risks sustaining a system in which TGNC students must navigate classrooms that affirm them in theory but misgender them in practice.

Such curricular patterns demonstrate a persistent tension between the Ministry's stated commitments to inclusion and the linguistic forms it authorizes. They reveal how the curriculum constructs binary gender not only through what is taught but through what is absent. In the following section, I look to see the extent to which Ontario school board policies challenge, reinforce, or remain silent on the same linguistic constraints that structure the curriculum itself.

A Summary of School Board Policy

Across Ontario's 32 public anglophone school boards, only four have updated their policies, procedures, or guidelines since 2021 to explicitly address inclusive French language within broader commitments to gender identity and gender expression. The following subsections present findings from analysis of each individual board policy related to gender inclusive language in French, and then noteworthy themes from a comparative analysis of the board policies. The following subsections review each board's approach and highlight the unevenness of policy leadership across the province.

Durham District School Board (DDSB)

The Durham District School Board updated its *Human Rights Inclusive Design and Accommodation Procedure* in 2022, under the broader Human Rights, Anti-Discrimination and Anti-Racism Policy.[4] On page 12, the procedure states:

[4] It is unclear if previous versions of this procedure also mentioned inclusive French, as the only available document on the DDSB website is the current one dated 2022.

> Trans students and employees have the right to […] Have their chosen name/pronouns (including pronouns other than the masculine or feminine, such as 'they', 'ze', 'hir' (or 'iel' in French, for example)[5] reflected in school and employment documents and records. (DDSB Human Rights Inclusive Design and Accommodation Procedure, 2022, p. 12)

DDSB explicitly recognizes "*iel*" in French in their publicly-available inclusion policy and procedure document.. Although the document does not elaborate beyond pronouns, it signals recognition that inclusive French exists and that students have the right to have their chosen French pronoun be used in institutional documentation.

Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board (HWDSB)

The Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board updated its *Gender Identity and Gender Expression Procedure: Students* in 2023. Section 2.4 on Curriculum and Gender Neutral & Inclusive Language includes a specific subpoint on French. Subpoint 2.4.4 reads:

> Currently there is a lack of gender-neutral alternatives in French, with the exception of a gender-neutral pronoun, 'iel', which should be introduced to students and utilized where appropriate. (HWDSB, *Gender Identity and Gender Expression Procedure: Students*, 2023, p. 20)

HWDSB mentions the lack of inclusive French language: "Currently there is a lack of gender-neutral alternatives in French, with the exception of a gender-neutral pronoun, "iel", which should be introduced to students and utilized where appropriate." and yet encourages the classroom use of *iel* (p. 20). However, like the DDSB, no reference is made to gendered adjective or verb agreement, implying pronouns alone constitute the scope of inclusive French.

[5] The missing bracket is intentional, it is missing in the original quote.

Ottawa-Carleton District School Board (OCDSB)

Published earlier than the others, OCDSB's *Gender Identity and Gender Expression: Fostering inclusive learning environments for all students* (2021) provides the most substantial treatment of inclusive French. The policy notes:

> Staff and students are often less familiar with gender inclusive language in French. […] Introducing students to these options in French language classes is encouraged. (OCDSB, 2021, p. 14)

The policy includes two graphics outlining inclusive oral and written language strategies, making it the only board document to provide detailed pedagogical scaffolding (see Appendix A). A later section explains:

> In French, students may request to use pronouns other than 'il' or 'elle' and/or verb, noun, and adjective agreement other than masculine or feminine. This may include pronouns such as 'ol' or 'iel' and written agreement such as 'étudiant.e.' (OCDSB, 2021, p. 24)

This acknowledgement of agreement structures—verbs, adjectives, and nouns—goes far beyond the pronoun-only framing seen in DDSB and HWDSB.

Renfrew County District School Board (RCDSB)

RCDSB's *Gender Identity and Gender Expression Guideline* (2022) mirrors OCDSB's endorsement of inclusive French almost verbatim. Its guideline states:

> In French-language instruction, students or staff may request to use pronouns other than 'il' or 'elle' and/or verb, noun, and adjective agreement other than masculine or feminine. This may include pronouns such as 'ol' or 'iel' and written agreement such as étudiant.e. (RCDSB, 2022, p. 12)

The same two graphics from OCDSB are included, suggesting a shared or adapted framework for implementation. The following sections detail findings from comparison of the board policies which revealed four noteworthy areas of similarity and difference related to accessibility of documents, token mentions of inclusive French, and reach of the policy itself across stakeholder groups.

Accessibility

It is worth noting here that these board policies varied markedly in how easy they were to find. The HWDSB, OCDSB, and RCDSB policies were much easier to find online than the DDSB, and their mentions of inclusive French were much clearer. The DDSB procedure was difficult to locate without knowing its exact title or placement within the board's larger human rights policy, making its reference to inclusive French effectively hidden. While HWDSB's document was easier to find, its mention of "*iel"* appears only near the end, reducing its visibility. Moreover, the *Teachers* version of the HWDSB procedure includes no reference to inclusive French at all, raising questions about whether the guidance is intended for pedagogical use.

In contrast, both OCDSB and RCDSB policies were straightforward to locate, clearly titled, and contained more comprehensive and accessible discussions of gender-inclusive French. Their inclusion of graphics suggests an effort being made on their part to make their objectives clear, signalling an intent to promote all stakeholder understanding of how inclusive French can support their board policies.

Mentions of Inclusive French

Looking across the policies, we can see variety in examples of inclusive French provided by each board. For example, the DDSB procedure mentions the existence of "iel" as a gender-neutral pronoun, but nothing more. There was only one pronoun mentioned in French, "iel," that

would provide a gender-neutral alternative. Whereas three alternatives were provided in English. And, although this section was specific to names and pronouns, it insinuates that pronouns are the only language form requiring discussion when it comes to inclusive French. Gender impacts pronouns, but also noun, adjective, and verb agreement. This procedure had no other mention of forms of inclusive French language to navigate adjectives or verbs. Similarly, the HWDSB procedure only mentions "iel." Presenting a single option for a neutral pronoun in French, such as "iel" which is suggested in both DDSB and HWDSB procedure, risks rendering their attempt to turn the gender binary into a gender ternary[6]. The function of inclusive language is to provide a multitude of options; give people choice as to how their gender is represented in the language they are learning. Presenting only a single option, especially after labelling inclusive French language as "lacking," can be deemed insufficient given the plethora of inclusive vocabulary and grammar currently being used in French-speaking communities..

Similar to the DDSB, this mention of inclusive French discusses pronouns alone, without mention of how gender impacts verb or adjective agreement. In contrast, the OCDSB graphics shared provide options for gender-inclusive oral and written language, acknowledging that there is a distinction for language options available and that both need to be treated differently. As seen in Appendix A, the section on names and pronouns fully recognizes how gender impacts the French language, and that a conversation focused solely on pronouns is not sufficient. Verb, noun, and adjective agreement gender issues are named explicitly, and examples are given in the graphics (see Appendix A). Finally, the OCDSB chose to offer two pronoun options, both "ol" and "iel." These pronouns, and others, are also visible in the graphics shared. The RCDSB presents the same graphics, and the same pronoun options.

[6] Referring to simply adding a third "neutral" option to appear more inclusive rather than dismantling the binary systems in place altogether. See Du (2020) for more on gender ternary.

Language Made Available – To Whom?

The HWDSB gender identity and gender expression procedure encourages the introduction of "iel" to students and use of "iel" where appropriate. However, the employee version of this procedure has no mention of the need for inclusive language in French to be used for teachers (HWDSB, Gender Identity and Gender Expression Procedure: Employees, p. 12). This begs the question of whether inclusive French language need only apply to students, despite the reality that there are likely many other gender nonconforming stakeholders in the board. In contrast, the OCDSB recognizes that knowledge of gender-inclusive French language may be less common but encourages these language options to be introduced to everyone. The DDSB procedure starts with a "Trans students and employees…" again an acknowledgement that inclusive language is meaningful to everyone in schools, not just students. When endorsed, subsequent comments related to the appropriateness of said use were present in these same board policies. For example, the word "appropriate" is used in the HWDSB policy to describe when best to use inclusive language forms. It is unclear in this policy whether the decision of when to use "iel" and in what context rests with teachers, students, administrators, or others. Integral to this discussion of appropriateness is the danger of confounding "appropriate" with "when needed", since oftentimes TGNC people are forced to out themselves in order for inclusive language to be deemed "appropriate" enough to be used or taught in class. While the RCDSB policy goes one step above to add "or staff," acknowledging that gender-inclusive language may be requested by community members other than students, it still does not mention that these language forms may be used and taught outside of scenarios where someone has directly requested that others use these language forms to address them. Learning inclusive French only when there is a student (or other member of the board community) who discloses their gender nonconforming identity is limiting.

The presentation of gender-neutral and inclusive French as optional relies primarily on teacher's familiarity of these language developments, as well as teachers' opinions on inclusivity for such language to be visible in the classroom. It is unclear to what extent French-language educators are equipped to effect these changes.

Beyond Pronouns

Analysis of the four school board documents showed pronouns to be the most popular acknowledgement of inclusive French language. Some policies mention gender-neutral French pronouns as if they are the only language form to consider, whereas others reference the many other ways French grammar is impacted by gender. Some school boards discuss inclusive French use in French language instruction exclusively, while others only specify "in French" and therefore could be used throughout the school. Some policies require students and staff to out themselves for inclusive French language to be taught to or used by those around them (Martino et al., 2020).

Across all four boards, the same structural limitations persist. Pronouns receive far more attention than the full grammatical systems affected by gender. Inclusive French is positioned as optional rather than as a foundational component of equitable language instruction. Uptake remains dependent on individual educators' awareness, beliefs, and comfort. Without consistent, guidance, inclusive French continues to be unevenly implemented and unevenly available across the province. These four school boards should consider updating their policies to represent the full grammar impacted by gender, the necessity to learn inclusive French all the time, and to address the wider school community. The other 28 school boards have examples to draw from to begin addressing inclusive French in their policies and guidelines. It may be unfair to critique the efforts of four boards when the other 28 have not recognized that the issue is even worthy of policy considerations.

Discussion

This article sought to illustrate that while the Ontario curriculum gestures toward inclusion, it continues to prioritize that linguistically binary French be taught in FSL programs. Similarly, only four of the thirty-two anglophone boards mention inclusive French in policy, and even these references are limited in scope.

Current school board policies gesture toward inclusivity but ultimately authorize inclusive French only on an "as needed" basis. This leaves teachers to decide when and for whom inclusive forms are appropriate, creating uneven access across classrooms and placing the burden of change on individual educators rather than on the system. A policy or curriculum commitment that treats gender-inclusive French as a standard component of instruction, rather than an exception, would remove this burden. It would eliminate the requirement that TGNC students identify themselves to receive affirming language. More importantly, it would equip all students with the linguistic capacity to communicate respectfully with peers, colleagues, family members, and community members throughout their lives. These policies offer an important counterpoint to the provincial curriculum: while the curriculum continues to assume, and reproduce, a strictly binary French grammatical system, several boards have begun to formalize linguistic alternatives that support TGNC students.

One point that all school boards seem to overlook is that inclusive French language should not only be taught "when needed." Inclusive French could be taught to everyone so that this language becomes the norm. Everyone learning French always needs to learn about inclusive French language, so that their French accurately reflects the realities of the real world - so that when their cousin or friend or coworker shares that they are non-binary, they immediately have the tools to communicate in French respectfully.

Collectively, these shortcomings reveal a significant ongoing gap. While the Ontario public education system has a duty of care to TGNC students, current structures do not equip teachers or students with the linguistic tools needed to proactively affirm gender diversity.

Conclusion

Public Schools in Ontario pride themselves on preparing students to use French in the real world, whether in higher education, employment, or everyday communication. Yet the analysis of curriculum and school-board policies shows that students are often taught a version of French that does not reflect the linguistic realities they will encounter beyond high school. Inclusive French is increasingly visible in public, professional, and academic contexts, and gender-diverse people are part of every community. To teach French without incorporating inclusive forms is to teach a language that no longer aligns with the communicative needs or social landscapes students will navigate.

This disconnect becomes evident when examining the broader environments in which students will use their French. Many students continue into post-secondary French studies, where inclusive French is already well established. Institutions such as Glendon College at York University (2022), the University of Montreal (2019), the University of Quebec (2021), Sherbrooke University (2021), and Laval University (2021) have published guides on gender-inclusive French that reflect ongoing linguistic developments. Students entering these programs encounter neopronouns, inclusive agreement patterns, and non-binary forms as part of standard academic practice. Others enter the workforce directly after high school, where inclusive French is also becoming commonplace. Companies addressing the public in French have adopted gender-inclusive forms, and even large corporations such as General Mills now use inclusive French on product packaging (see Appendix B). Whether students pursue university studies or begin working

immediately, inclusive French is already part of the communicative world they must navigate. Failing to introduce these forms in high school leaves students underprepared, undermining the very purpose of Ontario's public education mandate. Addressing this failure requires coordinated attention across curriculum, policy, and classroom practice.

Moving forward, how might curriculum policymakers must update French overall and specific expectations to reflect a gender-diverse bilingual community. Moreover, how might school boards revise policies so that recognition extends beyond pronouns? In turn, how might educators teach French as a second language in ways that presume, rather than question, the presence of TGNC people. Such gender affirming curriculum-making requires learning about inclusive French forms before a student or colleague discloses their identity. It also requires meaningful professional learning opportunities for teachers and administrators to strengthen their understanding of inclusive grammar, vocabulary, and usage. French teachers can lead these conversations within their departments, ensuring that instruction reflects the linguistic realities of students' communities.

Consequenlty, teacher education warrants more attention. For example, to what extent are teacher-candidates taught about inclusive French, provided with resources, or supported in developing affirming practices? Existing research suggests that, in the absence of explicit curriculum or policy guidance, FSL teachers often rely on informal networks, professional associations, and 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy organizations to navigate inclusive language use (Grant & Smith, 2025; Taylor et al., 2015). Consequently, much more research is needed to understand how these practices vary across Ontario and Canada, including in provinces where French is the dominant language or where French instruction is optional. Since gender-inclusive language is an

issue across Romance languages such as Spanish and Italian, these insights could also extend to language instruction more broadly.

Transgender and gender nonconforming people are part of every school community in Ontario. Census data makes this clear. So do the daily realities of classrooms, hallways, and families. Their identities are protected under the Ontario Human Rights Code, which affirms their right to be recognized and addressed in ways that reflect who they are. Schools have a responsibility to uphold these rights in every aspect of teaching, including the languages students learn. This analysis shows that gender-inclusive French is still largely missing from Ontario's curriculum and school board policies. Only four anglophone boards mention it at all, and even then, it is framed as something to use only when a student asks for it. This places the burden on TGNC students to disclose their identity to be spoken to respectfully. It overlooks students who may not feel safe coming out. It also overlooks staff, families, and community members who may use gender-inclusive French. French is a living language. It continues to evolve, just as our understanding of gender does. When schools teach only binary forms, they deny students the tools they need to speak with accuracy, care, and respect. Teaching inclusive French is not only a pedagogical choice. It is a matter of dignity, safety, and human rights.

Teaching French in a strictly binary way therefore carries significant consequences for fellow human beings. It denies TGNC students' right to be named and recognized in the language of instruction. It signals to all students that gender diversity is an exception rather than a fact of social life. And it perpetuates the curriculum's long-standing pattern of positioning masculine forms as default, even as official documents claim a commitment to equity, inclusion, and student well-being. Updating curriculum expectations, school board policies, and classroom practices is

not simply an administrative or pedagogical concern; it is an issue of safety, belonging, and human rights.

Ontario's public education system has the responsibility to prepare students for the world they are entering, not the world as it once was. A curriculum that teaches only binary French fails in this responsibility. Meaningful change will require coordinated action across curriculum policymakers, school boards, teacher education programs, and classroom educators. The document analysis presented in this article demonstrates both the urgency and the possibility of such change. Gender-inclusive French is already part of the linguistic landscape in workplaces, universities, and public life. It must now become part of the linguistic landscape of Ontario's French as a second language classrooms.

Appendices

Appendix A: OCDSB & RCDSB Inclusive French Graphics

OCDSB (2021) Gender Identity and Gender Expression, p. 15.

RCDSB (2022) Gender Identity and Gender Expression Guideline, p. 12-13

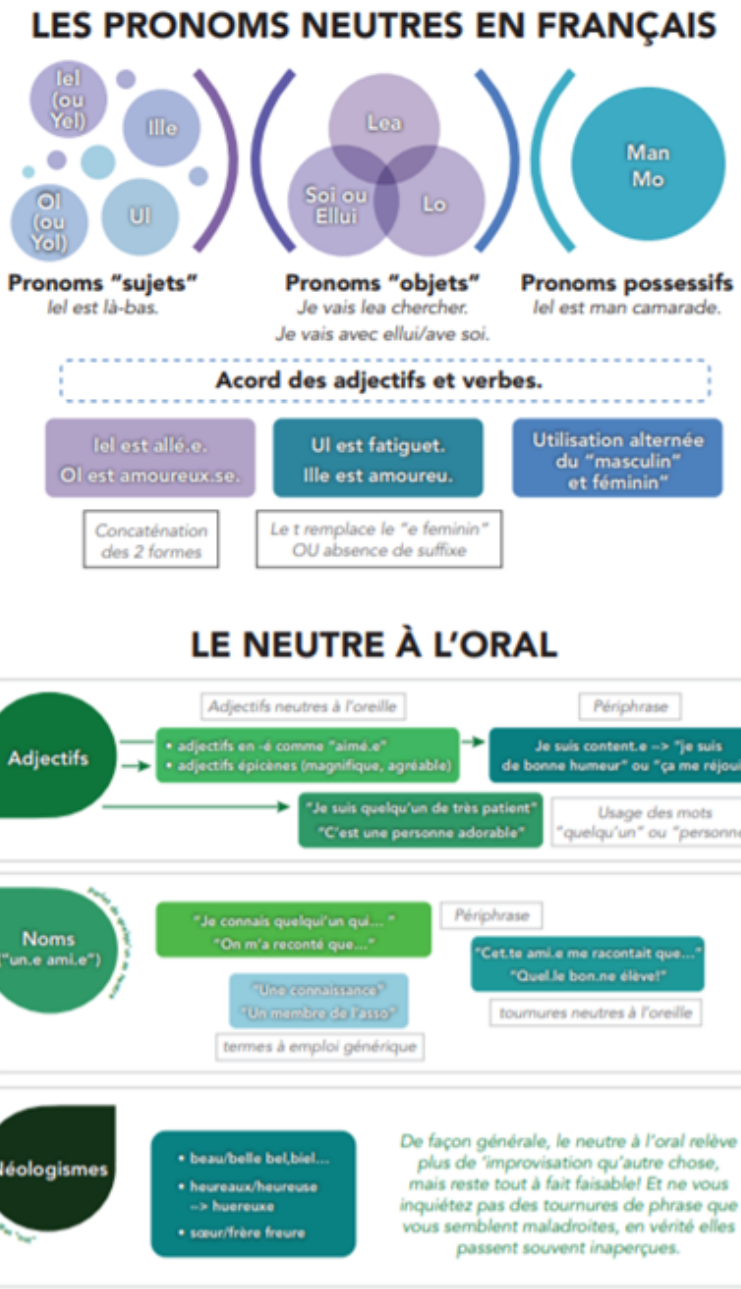

Image credits: Alex Benjamin
https://entousgenresblog.wordpress.com/2017/04/19/quels-pronoms-neutres-en-francais-et-comment-les-utiliser/

15

Appendix B: Cheerios Box

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Article 2

A Qualitative Study on Gender-Diverse Student Experiences of Learning French in Ontario

"I don't feel like learning about your gender identity and pronouns should be a privilege for those who take the time to research it." (Quote from participant Quinn)

The French language, often celebrated for its precision and beauty, can also be rigid. Its structure, deeply gendered, can render the invisible truly unseen; especially when it comes to those who exist beyond "il" and "elle." And yet, French has historically been taught in a binary way in Ontario. For example, in the Ontario FSL curriculum policy document (OME, 2014), the existing pronouns that identify an individual's gender are "il" (masculine), or "elle" (feminine), and every adjective and verb needs to change to reflect the gender of the subject. However, not all students identify as either as a man or a woman, girl or boy. The 2021 Canadian census data added a question regarding gender identity. This census recorded 0.33% of the population as identifying as transgender or nonbinary (Easton, 2022). Egale Canada (2021) reports, "0.79% of Gen Z (those born between 1997–2006) reported being transgender or non-binary" (p. 2). Such younger generations represent the current high school student population in Ontario, all of whom are required to take at least one French course.

In response, this study sought to shed light on the effects of teaching a historically binary gendered language to gender nonconforming students. Gender-inclusive French language exists. Gender neutral pronouns, such as "iel" have been created to help bring visibility to gender nonconforming (GNC) people. This study sought to understand the experiences of recent graduates of FSL classes of secondary school in Ontario. These six students were aged 18-25 at the time of the interviews and identified as gender nonconforming in some way. They had all learned French

in an anglophone public high school in Ontario. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand participant knowledge of inclusive French, experiences learning French as a gender nonconforming person, and views on potential changes to the French education system in Ontario. This article works to answer the following research question: How do transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) students describe their sense of (in)visibility, representation, and belonging as they learned French in these institutional contexts? Using critical discourse analysis, I examine interview transcripts to understand what their insights reveal about the current limitations and future possibilities of French language education in Ontario. Specifically, this study is situated within Ontario's public anglophone French as a Second Language system and is delimited the lived experiences of TGNC students who completed their French education within these institutional contexts. Rather than examining gender-inclusive language in abstraction, this qualitative study focuses on how institutional discourses and classroom practices converge to shape possibilities for recognition, visibility, and belonging in French language education. In what follows, this article seeks to illuminate broader questions about how power circulates through language pedagogy, and how these discursive structures are taken up, negotiated, or resisted by TGNC students.

Reviewing the Landscape: What Research Reveals About Gender and French Instruction

A central catalyst for this study is the growing body of research demonstrating that gender recognition through language has material consequences for TGNC young people. For example, transgender and nonbinary youth whose pronouns are respected by most people in their lives attempt suicide at half the rate of those whose pronouns are not respected (The Trevor Project, 2020). Consequently, using a student's pronouns respects their human rights and helps prevent suicide among TGNC youth. This is true for all languages being taught and used in schools. As

French is policed through curriculum, institutional norms, and everyday classroom practices, each level of the system shapes how students experience belonging or exclusion.

Consequently, for gender non-conforming (GNC) students, speaking or being spoken about in French can produce repeated microaggressions because gender permeates pronouns, verb and adjective agreement, and even occupational nouns. In response, Francophone and Francophile TGNC communities have developed a range of inclusive linguistic innovations—neopronouns such as *iel* and *al*, as well as forms of *écriture inclusive*. These efforts aim not only to correct gender bias but to affirm the existence of gender-diverse people within a traditionally binary system. Some of these forms have gained wider acceptance: *iel* was added to the online *Le Robert* in 2021, and both federal and provincial government resources now provide guidance for more inclusive French. Despite these developments, it remains unclear whether such forms are being taught or acknowledged in school settings.

Research on inclusive and nonbinary forms of French has expanded rapidly in recent years, forming an emerging subfield concerned with how users challenge the language's binary grammatical structure. Ashley (2019) proposes a systematic set of strategies for nonbinary French, while Kosnick (2019) offers practical approaches for avoiding unnecessary gendering in everyday communication. Drawing on survey data from 174 adult French speakers, Knisely (2020a) identifies patterns in how nonbinary Francophones adapt French to better reflect their identities. Kosnick (2021) further documents a range of inclusive linguistic practices such as but not limited to epicene forms, neologisms, and the use of middots and in turn advances a seven-point pedagogical manifesto for teaching French in ways that affirm all genders. Additional studies, such as Dumais (2021) and Kaplan (2022), illustrate how inclusive French continues to evolve through compounding, systemic, and invariable forms used within nonbinary-speaking communities.

Collectively, their research illustrates how teaching French language is undergoing meaningful change to more accurately represent diverse gender identities (Knisely, 2020b; Pilon, 2020). What remains unclear, however, is whether such inclusive French practices are taken up in school contexts where most learners encounter the language.

The current Ontario FSL 9-12 curriculum (2014) encourages 'gender-neutral language' only once and suggests the pronoun 'on' as a substitute for gendered pronouns (Grant et al. 2024). Otherwise, there are no other mentions of gender-neutral French language, and no mentions of inclusive French language in the current French curriculum. At the same time, what existing research makes clear is that gender-diverse students face multiple forms of discrimination within schools. For example, Bower-Brown et al. (2020) document how curriculum, peers, school spaces, and teacher actions can marginalize TGNC students. Access to safe spaces, particularly bathrooms and change rooms, has and continues to receive significant attention within the research literature (Davies et al., 2017; Omercajic, 2022). As Kosciw et al. (2016) note, 2SLGBTQI students often avoid areas perceived as unsafe. Given the deeply gendered nature of French instruction, FSL classrooms might have the potential to function as spaces where GNC students experience exclusion or feel unsafe.

Emerging TGNC-focused scholarship reveals how these structural linguistic commitments shape student experiences. Spiegelman (2022) illustrates how reliance on binary forms can produce pedagogical harm, particularly when teachers lack models for affirming students' identities through language. Grant et al. (2024) extended this critique by pointing out that Ontario's FSL curriculum gestures toward diversity while still reinscribing binary thinking in terms of reducing "inclusion" to a tokenistic reference and conflating grammatical gender with social identity. Paechter et al. (2021) similarly demonstrate how both formal and hidden curricula restrict

the possibilities available to students who do not fit binary expectations. Schools shape not only how French is taught but also whose identities the language is permitted to recognize. Instructional decisions in Ontario's FSL programs reflect the combined influence of provincial curriculum mandates, school board policies, and the everyday interpretive work of teachers. Within such a system, attempts to introduce gender-inclusive forms do not take place on neutral ground. Rather, they rub against curricular frameworks built around binary linguistic norms.

These constraints are compounded by limited institutional support. Kassen et al. (2022) stress that teachers often lack access to gender-inclusive French resources and receive little curricular guidance on how to integrate them, resulting in highly uneven implementation. Even when inclusive practices are not mentioned at all, their enactment depends largely on individual teacher discretion. Such research points to the need for deliberate, system-level commitments to gender-inclusive French instruction and a call for approaches that move beyond symbolic inclusion toward practices that meaningfully affirm TGNC students.

Role of teachers

A theme found in the literature is that inclusive language cannot be treated as an occasional accommodation but must be woven into everyday teaching practices if TGNC students are to experience dignity, safety, and recognition (Knisely & Paiz, 2021). These scholars emphasize that what is at stake is not simply grammatical accuracy, but whether students can participate in classroom life without having to negotiate or defend their identities. This insistence on normalization rather than exceptionality is captured by Knisely and Paiz (2021), who stress:

> Inclusivity is not a "one-and-done" proposition; it should not be relegated to a "gay day" or "trans day" in a class that appears suited to handling "controversial" issues […] Doing so maintains the idea that LGBTQ+ concerns are the controversial, special interests of a

> small group. They are not. They are the lived concerns of a non-trivial part of the population that has/should have the same rights to exist as any other human being. Therefore, queer pedagogues advocate an "early and often" approach, infusing LGBTQ+ content throughout the curriculum. (p. 31)

Without this everyday integration, TGNC students frequently bear the burden of declaring or explaining themselves simply to have their gender affirmed. Martino et al. (2020) name the emotional and social cost of this dynamic, noting that "Trans visibility is contingent upon a student being required to declare their identity" (p. 2). They extend this critique, by reminding us:

> It is this requirement of the individual trans student in school to become visible in order to secure their right to be recognised that helps us to understand how resorting simply to legal and policy frames as an emancipatory force for ensuring trans inclusion fails to address the school system's implication in supporting cisnormativity and cisgenderism. (p. 3)

These insights direct attention to teachers as pivotal actors in translating and enacting curriculum policies within a broader educational system that still remains structured, for the most part, by binary assumptions (Grant et al. 2024). Adults in schools such as teachers, administrators, and support staff play a formative role in shaping how gender and sexuality are understood and policed (Mayo, 2016). In turn, research has shown how educators may unintentionally reinforce cisnormativity through routine practices and curricular choices (Menzies & Santoro, 2018), even in contexts where policy frameworks nominally support inclusion. For example, Omercajic and Martino's (2020) analysis of Ontario school policies demonstrates that schools often remain reliant on accommodation models that place responsibility on individual students, rather than adopting pedagogies rooted in gender justice or democratic inclusion. Their call to "explicitly articulate a pedagogical commitment to gender justice and gender democratization in schools" foregrounds

the need for system-level transformation, not simply discretionary, teacher-by-teacher interpretation (p. 1).

Within FSL classrooms, these dynamics are intensified by the structural gendering of French itself. The Ontario's 2013 elementary French curriculum, for example, required teachers to take on a level of flexibility, openness, and critical engagement that many felt unprepared for (Gour, 2015). Research also shows that when teachers engage directly with TGNC linguistic practices, the benefits are pedagogical as well as social. Knisely's (2022a, 2022b) work on gender-just language pedagogies demonstrates that integrating inclusive French encourages intersectional thinking and even reduces mean grammatical error rates. Ullman (2022) likewise emphasizes that affirming environments strengthen TGNC students' sense of belonging, an element foundational to academic success, and, Patev et al. (2019) found that the use of gender-inclusive language tends to correlate with more positive attitudes toward TGNC people, suggesting that linguistic practice itself can signal forms of allyship or exclusion.

While collectively these studies illustrate the potential of inclusive French second language pedagogy, they also highlight substantial gaps. Much of this scholarship comes from contexts where French is optional rather than compulsory, or where TGNC experiences are addressed only in broad LGBTQ frameworks. Few studies center GNC students' firsthand experiences within Ontario's anglophone public FSL programs, where learners must navigate a language that, when taught according to the curriculum, insists on a binary gender order. This project addresses that gap by examining how GNC former FSL students understood, resisted, and/or internalized the gendered expectations embedded in their French classrooms.

The existing research scholarship also demonstrates that although inclusive linguistic practices are increasingly recognized across Francophone and French-speaking contexts outside

the classroom, far less is known about how gender-diverse students in Ontario experience learning French as a second language within the constraints of anglophone public schooling. To address this gap, this article examines the experiences of gender-nonconforming (GNC) students who completed at least one French-as-a-second language (FSL) course in Ontario's anglophone public schools. Returning to the core purpose outlined in the introduction, the major thrust of this article is not to map all GNC experiences broadly but to provide a detailed, situated case that illuminates how six GNC students understood, negotiated, and were shaped by the gendered structures of French instruction.

While studies such as Grant, Masson, and Carrol (2024) have examined queer and trans representation in French education, this project focuses more narrowly on how gender and language interact within the lived experiences of GNC learners. It does not examine 2SLGBTQI school experiences writ large; instead, it investigates how participants encountered the gendering of French itself, and how those encounters shaped their sense of recognition, (in)visibility, and belonging. Moreover, what such existing research literature demonstrates is that gender, language, and schooling are not politically neutral domains but rather are shaped through historically reproduced relations of power via the school curriculum. Drawing on Foucault's (1978) conception of discourse as a site through which power circulates rather than simply operates from above, the research literature illustrates how educational institutions participate in the production of what forms of gender become intelligible, speakable, and legitimate (Grant et al., 2024). Curriculum documents, school board policies, and classroom practices function as discursive regimes that regulate not only which forms of French may be taught, but also which gendered identities can be named, recognized, or rendered invisible (Grant 2025a, Grant 2025b). In turn, research on inclusive French shows that while linguistic innovations exist and circulate widely beyond schools,

institutional frameworks often continue to privilege binary norms, thereby constraining teachers' pedagogical choices and students' possibilities for self-representation. At the same time, scholarship on TGNC student experiences makes clear that these discursive constraints have material consequences for students' sense of belonging, safety, and dignity. Understanding how power operates through language in educational contexts therefore requires analytic attention to the everyday discursive practices through which norms are reproduced, resisted, or unsettled. This insight informs the methodological approach taken in this qualitative study, which turns to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a means of examining how power circulates through interview narratives and institutional discourses shaping French language education in Ontario.

A Qualitative Study Methodology

This study comprised of two different steps. The first involved conducting semi-structured interviews with six GNC young adults aged 18–25 who had recently graduated from Ontario's anglophone public secondary schools. Participants were required to speak English fluently for interview purposes and to have completed at least one FSL course (core, extended, or immersion). Recruitment occurred online using social media outreach and snowball sampling. Although the initial goal was to interview eight to ten participants, recruitment challenges resulted in six interviews.

Below is a collection of key information from each participant in the study.

Pseudonym	**Pronouns**	**Gender Identity**	**Region in Ontario**	**Elementary French**	**Secondary French**
Trevor	They/them	Nonbinary genderqueer	Southern Ontario	Immersion	Immersion

Signal	He/they	Nonbinary transman	Southern Ontario	Immersion	Immersion
Xavier	They/them	Gender nonconforming	Southern Ontario	Core	Core
Mark	He/they	Trans	Northern Ontario	Immersion	Core
Quinn	He/him	Gender nonconforming/ transmasculine	Southern Ontario	Core	Core
Agnes	Any	Nonbinary	Southern Ontario	Core	AP

Step two involved analyzing the interview transcripts using critical discourse analysis (CDA). As a method that examines how power operates through language, CDA is well suited to investigating how participants made sense of learning a linguistically gendered language within a school system shaped by (cis)normative expectations. CDA has an explicitly emancipatory orientation that includes a commitment to identifying structural inequalities and amplifying the perspectives of marginalized groups (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). This orientation aligns with the study's focus on GNC youth and resonates with queer theoretical approaches that interrogate and destabilize normative gender categories (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978).

The analysis involved grouping participant quotations into thematic categories such as challenges with gendered grammar, interactions with teachers and administrators, and moments of affirmation or confusion related to identity. Close attention was paid to how participants positioned

themselves, the discursive resources they drew upon, and the ways institutional practices reinforced or disrupted gendered norms. When taken together, the use of qualitative study methodology and CDA contributes to a contextualized and critical understanding of how gender inclusivity, or the absence of it, was experienced by six students in Ontario's Anglophone FSL classrooms.

(In)visibility

The participants' accounts illustrate how French was taught and learned within institutional contexts that continue to privilege binary gender norms. Across interviews, students consistently emphasized that gender-inclusive or gender-neutral French was never part of their formal instruction. When inclusive forms appeared, they did so informally through peers, online spaces, or participants' own initiative rather than through classroom teaching. The following analysis traces how students navigated the gendered structure of French, how they made sense of the limited or absent recognition of their identities, and how these linguistic encounters shaped their broader experiences of (in)visibility, belonging, and constraint in anglophone FSL programs.

Trevor[7], who now identifies as nonbinary genderqueer and uses they/them pronouns, recalled that while their school had a GSA[8], they did not mention any impact of this queer inclusion in FSL instruction. As they explained, "Not really, my school had a GSA, but that was the extent of any kind of queer inclusion at my high school and it was a fairly homophobic environment, so that was not even something that would come up at school." For Trevor, queer inclusion existed at the margins, never visible within the language curriculum itself. Similarly, Signal described a near-total absence of recognition, noting, "No, not that I can recall. I don't even remember hearing mention of trans people as a concept until probably early high school… definitely not," and adding,

[7] All names of participants are pseudonyms, and any identifying information has been redacted.
[8] Gender Sexuality Alliance, or Gay Straight Alliance (or other variations)

"I cannot recall a single French language teacher that brought something like that to the table." Their account suggests a pattern rather than an isolated gap. Building on this theme, Xavier, who identifies as gender nonconforming, linked the absence of inclusive language to teacher preparation rather than the curriculum alone, explaining, "I had a teacher that I think would have been [inclusive] had she been just a bit younger and more in touch with everything […] but we didn't touch on nonbinary people at all." Xavier's frustration was further evident when they remarked, "It's not like trans people haven't openly existed for who knows how long," highlighting the disconnect between lived realities and classroom practice.

The (in)visibility described by participants is not simply the result of omission but is actively produced through the structures and practices of FSL education. The absence of gender-diverse identities within classroom discourse, curriculum, and pedagogy renders such identities difficult to name, recognize, or sustain within the learning environment. As participants encountered a French language structured through binary norms, they were not only navigating grammar but also negotiating their own legibility within the classroom. Visibility, therefore, was not evenly available. Rather, it was contingent on informal networks, personal initiative, or exceptional teacher openness rather than embedded within institutional practice. This uneven visibility reinforces a broader pattern of curricular silence, where gender-diverse identities remain peripheral to what is considered teachable knowledge. Consequently, participants' experiences reveal how invisibility operates as a structural condition of schooling, shaping not only what can be seen, but who can be acknowledged as fully present within the French-language classroom.

Representation

Quinn a gender nonconforming transmasculine participant, also underscored teachers' unfamiliarity with emerging forms such as *iel*. When he mentioned the pronoun to his teacher,

“she kind of blinked and went ‘oh!’,” a reaction he described as typical and neither hostile nor engaged, but indicative of how inclusive French remained outside pedagogical awareness. Trevor similarly encountered limited knowledge when they asked whether a gender-neutral pronoun existed and were offered only “on” or “nous,” recalling that “that was sort of the beginning and the end of the conversation,” a phrase that conveys both their curiosity and the resignation that followed. In contrast, Agnes, who identifies as fluid nonbinary, described one teacher who created a permissive environment where “you were allowed to be as you are, and it wasn’t questioned, and it was really safe in that sense.” Although, they also noted this was an isolated instance rather than evidence of broader systemic support. Quinn explained that he learned about “iel” through friends in France, finding it “very heartening” to see francophone communities developing more expansive linguistic practices, and observing that “a lot of what we do as trans individuals is changing language to fit more of this nuanced understanding of gender” while French speakers were “doing something very similar in their own way.” Together, these accounts show how students often had to look beyond school for affirmation and representation, revealing a disconnect between institutional practices and the evolving linguistic resources that could support recognition and belonging.

These students’ experiences demonstrate how their school leaders and teachers consistently positioned nonbinary and gender-fluid identities as peripheral within FSL instruction. Across the six interviews, gender-inclusive French was either dismissed, unknown, or treated as an individual curiosity rather than a pedagogical responsibility. Even when teachers expressed openness or offered partial answers such as “on” or “nous,” these responses functioned as placeholders rather than genuine attempts to expand the linguistic resources available to students. Moments of surprise, hesitation, or silence in response to “iel” illustrate how educators’ limited knowledge and

the absence of structural guidance reproduced the normativity of binary French. These dynamics echo broader findings that teachers often view gender-inclusive practices as optional or dependent on individual initiative rather than curricular expectation (Patev et al., 2019; Pantić et al., 2019). They also align with research documenting how French grammar and institutional bodies such as the Académie française exert powerful influence over what is considered legitimate linguistic change (Martino et al., 2022; Gour, 2015). From a critical discourse analytic perspective, these patterns reveal how power circulates through everyday classroom language practices such as, but not limited to, how teacher uncertainty became a mechanism through which the curriculum's (cis)normative structure was maintained, narrowing what could be spoken, imagined, or legitimized in the classroom. In effect, participants were not simply learning a gendered language but learning the boundaries of intelligible gender within the institution itself.

The participants' accounts identify different pressures they felt to conform to the binary masculine–feminine structure of French while navigating their gender identities. Although each described different pathways of self-understanding, all six emphasized that inclusive or gender-neutral French was not part of their formal learning. Their experiences demonstrate how the gendered architecture of French shaped classroom interactions, limited recognition, and reinforced broader institutional silences around TGNC identities.

In this sense, the lack of representation identified by participants is not simply a matter of absent vocabulary or incomplete teacher knowledge. Rather, it reflects a broader institutional condition in which gender-diverse identities are positioned as peripheral or unintelligible within the pedagogical and linguistic norms of FSL education. As participants navigated a language structured through a masculine–feminine binary, they were not only learning grammatical conventions but also encountering the limits of who could be recognized within those conventions.

The absence of gender-inclusive French in formal instruction thus operates as a form of curricular erasure, where possibilities for self-representation are constrained and recognition is deferred to spaces outside of schooling. In turn, representation becomes contingent, uneven, and dependent on individual teachers rather than sustained through systemic support, ultimately shaping how TGNC students come to understand their place within both the language and the classroom.

Belonging

As the findings turn from classroom practices to students' sense-making, the interviews show how the absence of gender-inclusive French shaped participants' experiences of belonging. Although none of the six students were formally taught gender-neutral or inclusive forms in their FSL classrooms, they each described how this absence, paired with later encounters with inclusive French outside school, shaped both their linguistic development and their understanding of their own gender identities. When French is taught in a reductive essentialized binary way, it has the potential to exclude nonbinary students. The contrast between what was sanctioned within school and what was available beyond it prompted participants to reflect on what it might have meant to learn French in ways that acknowledged rather than erased who they were becoming.

Signal described first learning about gender-neutral French not through schooling but through online trans communities, explaining, "Not the term, the only thing relating to gender neutrality in French that I've heard is the 'iel' pronoun, which I heard about a couple years ago which I think is awesome and very, very cool." He recalled encountering it informally—"I think I saw it on Twitter or something, I think I learned about it through other trans people online, who were still in French circles because it was […] during college that I found out about it"—a pathway that highlights how completely absent inclusive French had been from his public education. His excitement about discovering "iel" carried both imaginative and linguistic significance. As he

reflected, “Oh, it was sick… if in an alternate universe where my mom met my dad in Quebec… that would be a pronoun I would want to use… I would want to use that pronoun actively.” For Signal, inclusive French offered not only personal affirmation but a vision of what his linguistic identity might have been had such language been available earlier. He emphasized its structural appeal as well: “I thought it was such a cool… I thought it sounded good for one. And I thought it was such a smart way to kind of blend the two and get around inherent gendering in the French language.” Signal’s feelings of belonging in the language expanded when he learned about “iel”.

Quinn expressed a similar sense of possibility on learning that “iel” existed, noting, “it was really cool… I was well versed in anglophone gender identity stuff, I was surprised but it also made sense.” Like Signal, he encountered the pronoun outside school, through friends in France rather than teachers or classroom practices. Mark likewise learned about “iel” informally, explaining, “I’ve seen awareness posts about it briefly on the internet but didn’t read it at the time,” and noting that it had “never” appeared in school. His repetition of “no, never in school” underscores how Mark contrasted the institutional silence he had experienced with the linguistic innovation happening in broader social contexts.

Xavier encountered nonbinary people through online friends of friends. When asked to elaborate on feelings of safety or inclusion in the classroom, Xavier reflected, “Honestly, I didn’t think about it that much at the time. Beyond a little bit of confusion and a little bit of poking at it and being like ‘this is silly,’ beyond that, at the time, didn’t really experience any emotions about it. Because I just didn’t grasp that there was anything different. So, I didn’t know, that, I was missing something.” This shows a paradox: because gender neutral language was never presented as an option, Xavier did not initially feel excluded or like they did not belong. By saying “I didn’t grasp that there was anything different” shows the strict binary structure is so normalized that its

limitations were invisible at the time. Xavier added “that’s definitely something that now I’m like ‘wow this is silly’ and every time I have something I rant about with friends because I love language and I love linguistics in general and so it’s one of those things where ‘why is this?’ now I get that rage but while I was learning it for the first time, not so much.” There is frustration in this reflection on their education. Xavier shares a delayed, but strong reaction to the rigidity of the French language system. Their emotion shared, “rage,” shows deep feelings about the injustice of the exclusion they once accepted as normal.

Unlike most participants in this study, Signal did not feel connected to a TGNC identity until the end of high school. When asked about feelings of representation or visibility in the French classroom, they said “That’s kind of hard because I didn't identify otherwise when I was a kid, I staunchly believed I was a girl for a very long time. I know a lot of trans people will look back and be like, ‘oh I was always this gender’ but I'm personally just for me of the belief that I very much was a girl and then became something else. So back then I was fine with it. I didn't really have any issues when it came to representation in the classroom.” Signal did not experience the same exclusion or disconnect between language and identity because he identified within the gender binary while receiving French instruction.

Whereas Trevor “felt so uncomfortably hyper visible” completing a project on queer issues in grade ten. “I really didn’t want to address it again. And that was the Independent Study Unit at the end of the year a presentation in front of the whole class on it. I had to write a paper. I wrote on trans issues again in an English class, a few years later, but that was a much different and less kind of uncomfortable experience there.” Trevor’s experience suggests that when gender identity was discussed in school, it was done in a way that placed full attention on 2SLGBTQI students and not on being inclusive in everyday learning. When asked if that feeling of visibility extended

into the French classroom through pronoun use, Trevor mentioned "I was honestly kind of glad not to have that sort of hyper visible target thing going on. I was using she/they pronouns as well at the time. I've just like 'okay this is like what I just use in French, this is okay, this is fine.' I didn't like it, but it was what it was." The use of the mantra "this is okay, this is fine" suggests a reluctant acceptance, not genuine inclusion. Trevor clearly settled for what was available rather than feeling fully represented. Again, there is evidence that even among participating gender nonconforming students, there was a pressure to conform to binary language norms is present.

Agnes had a comment about authorities who established rules for French language use, "when things are bigger than you, you don't ask questions because there's people in authority who say that 'this is just how it is.' And that's just how it has to be." The rigidity of the language is not just impacting gender identity but broader understandings of authority and power in the classroom. "This is just how it is" shows that students internalize authority and act accordingly. The rigid gender system of French becomes a mechanism through which students learn not just linguistic rules but also social hierarchies and deference to authority. References to a higher power demonstrate how the institutional structure of French reinforces the idea that language is unchangeable and is therefore difficult for students or teachers to challenge binary language norms. This difficulty challenging norms impacted students' feelings of belonging in the French classroom. Agnes added, in the context of their French class, "you put your head down and this is just what you have to do." Agnes and zir classmates were being forced to conform to gender norms.

Mark expressed feelings related to learning binary grammar rules. He said, "It made sense when applied to other people but when applied to myself it felt weird and wrong." Here, there is a disconnect between language and identity. The binary French grammar rules made technical sense, but did not align with Mark's personal experience. Their use of "weird and wrong" shows

discomfort, not just neutrality. Being forced into a gendered structure added to feelings of alienation. When asked to reflect on how it felt to be evaluated on those same binary grammar rules, Mark mentioned "It was similar, a lot of the lessons that I remember were done through worksheets with theoretical people, it felt a bit strange that there were no words that felt correct when applied to me but largely my experience learning the language felt separated from any understanding of myself." Mark clearly experienced a depersonalized language learning experience when he said, "theoretical people". Students were clearly not encouraged to see themselves reflected in their French classroom, and therefore not represented in the language, which was emphasized as a central goal of both the 1999 and 2014 versions of the FSL curriculum. Mark's self-expression was made impossible as they had "no words that felt correct when applied to me" due to the rigid gendered structure of French.

Xavier described a similar difficulty understanding their differences: "I didn't realize nonbinary was an option for me until end of grade nine, like very end of grade nine despite probably connecting with the identity all the way through. If I would have had the words for it, it would have been who I was, but I didn't get that option." Without exposure to inclusive language, students struggle to articulate or explore their own identities. Saying "I didn't get that option" shows how education plays a role in shaping the available identities, and an absence of an option that connects to the student is harmful. However, Xavier shows a generational shift. "I see all my students which, openly identifying as queer, it's like 'Yes! I'm so happy because I didn't get that!'." Inclusion and representation is clearly increasing for students. Xavier's joy is juxtaposed with their own loss, and their past exclusion still resonates strongly.

Participants repeatedly emphasized that the absence of gender-inclusive French shaped not only how they understood the language but how they understood themselves. Participants who

were not exposed to inclusive French in school expressed feelings of missing out and frustration from the systemic exclusion. One participant described their feelings as rage. Some students shared how they did not feel like their gender identity was an option, because it was not one presented in the language they were learning. The language we know impacts what we know about the world. In turn, not having the language to describe one's gender meant students felt a disconnect to who they were as fellow human beings. Knisely & Paiz (2021) remind us that teaching inclusive language is an everyday practice that should be done early and often. Some participants, while asking their teachers what inclusive French existed, chose to out themselves and make their gender identity known. As Martino et al. (2020) stress "trans visibility is contingent upon a student being required to declare their identity (p. 2) For some participants, the idea that "this is just the way things are" perpetuated harmful TGNC exclusion in schools.

Paechter et al.'s (2021) research illustrates that both the implicit and explicit curriculum actively reproduce binary gender norms, a dynamic echoed clearly in participants' accounts. Several students described feeling unsafe or invisible in their French classrooms, not because of individual interpersonal conflict but because the structure of the French language itself rendered their identities unspeakable. Those who eventually encountered inclusive French did so *despite* school, not because of it such as, but not limited to learning "iel" through online networks, community connections, or informal peer circles. This pattern exposes a stark inequity where participants' schools and teachers were requiring them to master binary grammatical forms and leaving them to their own devices to seek out affirming linguistic options that aligned with their gender diversity on their own time, through their own labour. The question, then, is not simply whether inclusive French is available somewhere, but why institutions normalize a model where TGNC students must perform additional work to access language that names their existence. While

much research documents unsafe *physical* environments for TGNC youth in schools, these findings point to an equally pressing issue, namely, the risk of curricular exclusion functioning as its own form of harm. The analysis put forth in this study foregrounds that invisibility in Ontario's FSL programs and underscores the need to treat linguistic inclusion not as an optional supplement, but as a central responsibility of public education.

Participants' experiences of belonging, therefore, were not simply shaped by interpersonal interactions, but by the broader institutional and linguistic conditions of FSL education. In turn, the absence of gender-inclusive French limited not only how students could express themselves, but also how they could come to know themselves within the language. As participants described, belonging was often partial, deferred, or contingent, dependent on external discovery, personal labour, or quiet accommodation rather than supported through formal instruction. The gendered binary structure of French, reinforced through curriculum, assessment, and appeals to authority, positioned their gender-diverse identities as outside the bounds of what could be legitimately expressed or recognized. Consequently, the participants were not only learning a second language, but also internalizing the limits of their own intelligibility within it. Belonging, in this context, was not an inherent outcome of participation in the classroom, but something negotiated in relation to institutional silences that rendered their identities optional, invisible, or unspeakable within the pedagogical project itself.

Implications for Teacher Education and FSL Classrooms

These findings highlight how the absence of gender-inclusive French in Ontario's anglophone FSL classrooms is not merely a curricular or pedagogical gap but a structural condition that shapes how TGNC students come to understand themselves through language. Across interviews, participants described learning French in environments where only binary grammatical

forms were sanctioned, where inclusive alternatives were either unknown or treated as peripheral, and where students were left to search for affirming language outside of school. Having established how these omissions constrained students' experiences of visibility, representation, and belonging, this section turns to what participants believe must change—at the levels of curriculum, policy, and teacher education—to create FSL classrooms that genuinely include gender-diverse learners.

To begin, when participants were asked how French education in Ontario could become genuinely inclusive, many immediately identified structural barriers embedded in the broader governance of the French language itself. Trevor, for instance, expressed skepticism that inclusive forms would be embraced until officially recognized by the Académie française. "I highly doubt that it will be on any kind of official level again until it is accepted by The Academy," they explained. Yet Trevor also warned that resistance to change is untenable: "the world is changing whether the Academy wants it to or not… if they don't get on board… the Academy will just collapse." Their reflections highlight a tension between institutional authority and evolving linguistic realities, a gap within which schools currently operate. Trevor further noted that early FSL instruction remains dominated by rule memorization, "You need to learn the rules because this is how it's spoken," limiting opportunities to introduce discussions of gender until later grades. In their "ideal world," French would "move at a quicker pace towards a more inclusive language," acknowledging francophone diversity even while respecting linguistic specificity.

Similarly, Mark emphasized the need for school boards to collaborate directly with gender-diverse francophones who are generating inclusive linguistic forms. He argued that "there are more than a few nonbinary and gender non-conforming people in the French community that could or already have created language for themselves," suggesting that boards should "put out requests" and work with these speakers to integrate such forms into lessons and curriculum. In Mark's view,

inclusive French could be incorporated seamlessly: “incorporating any new language or grammar into lesson plans seems like the most straightforward idea.” He also encouraged teachers to open conversations with students about pronouns, asking which forms feel comfortable and why, particularly since “younger kids… make up words for themselves all the time.” For Mark, linguistic flexibility is already part of children’s everyday meaning-making; inclusive pronouns simply extend practices students intuitively recognize.

Building on this emphasis on collective expertise, Xavier proposed a more formalized approach: creating a task force of “French academics of queer identities” and marginalized people with lived experience to support curriculum reform. Such a group, they argued, could guide schools toward more flexible pronoun options, including neopronouns. Signal extended this idea by focusing on instructional materials, noting that “French written stories about nonbinary people is a great place to start.” He emphasized that queer content in French “was not something I’ve ever received at all,” and insisted that withholding inclusive French from learners, especially in terms of TGNC students, “just feels weird and disingenuous.” Both Xavier and Signal stressed that inclusive French should be embedded not only in policy but in everyday pedagogical resources.

In addition, Quinn drew attention to the emotional and practical burdens placed on TGNC students by the current “accommodation by request” model (Martino et al., 2020). Noting that new generations “demonstrate their desire to see themselves represented,” he argued that learning about gender identity “should not be a privilege for those who take the time to research it.” Students should not have to “go on a hunt to find something that represents you and then plead to implement that in your day-to-day school life.” For Quinn, inclusive French must be taught proactively so that recognition does not depend on individual disclosure. As he explained, “it is one thing to learn

things in the academic sphere, but it's another thing to feel that actually respected and implemented in your daily life."

Extending the conversation beyond curriculum, Agnes offered a holistic three-pronged strategy spanning policy, teacher education, and student empowerment. First, ze argued that policy mandates must explicitly require the teaching of gender-neutral language: "enforce the responsibility of teaching gender neutral language especially in French classes." Second, ze emphasized that teachers need training to understand "the nonbinary experience of learning a binary language," urging boards to help educators adopt "a new potentially more critical perspective." Finally, Agnes stressed that students themselves must have access to affirming information independent of institutional gatekeeping: "if there was a way for students to know without having to rely on the government or teachers… that would also make a really big impact."

The participants' recommendations converge on a central claim: withholding inclusive French is actively harmful. Leaving students to discover affirming linguistic tools on their own—whether online, through peers, or only in adulthood—creates inequitable pathways into identity formation. As Mark recalled, "there were no words that felt correct when applied to me," and Xavier echoed, "If I would have had the words for it, it would have been who I was, but I didn't get that option." Their reflections align with Knisely and Paiz's (2021) insistence that inclusive language must be taught early and routinely. Participants also described hypervisibility, vulnerability, and the need to self-advocate illustrating in turn the systemic patterns Martino et al. (2020) critique as structurally produced through disclosure-based accommodation. Such patterns of experiences are in response to what Paechter et al. (2021) identify as deeply binary implicit and explicit curricula, environments where TGNC students often feel unsafe, unseen, or linguistically erased.

Ultimately, the participants underscored that gender-inclusive French should be integral and not peripheral to FSL education in Ontario. Moreover, this qualitative study illustrates that language shapes how students conceptualize themselves and the world. Therefore, a FSL pedagogy that continues to teach only binary forms misrepresents the social realities it claims to prepare students for as they negotiate the Anglophone public schooling systems here in Ontario. As participants collectively affirmed, the world includes gender nonconforming, gender fluid, nonbinary, and agender fellow citizens. The language taught in schools should reflect this fact.

The findings put forth in this study underscore a systemic gap between the gender-inclusive French emerging in broader social contexts and the narrowly binary forms still taught in Ontario's anglophone FSL classrooms. Participants often assumed that only exceptionally "progressive" teachers might introduce inclusive forms, while others believed that resistance from administrators or linguistic authorities such as the *Académie française* effectively shut down possibilities for change. Across interviews, students described the resulting disconnect between their evolving gender identities and language pedagogical practices that offered them no words with which to articulate themselves. As they made clear, however, this absence is neither inevitable nor benign: it actively produces exclusion. What this study illustrates is that gender-diverse students deserve a language education that supports and affirms their gender identity in the same way that cisgender and binary-identifying students do. Moreover, gender nonconforming students should not have to bear the responsibility of learning gender-affirming language on their own. Nor should they have to specifically request their gender be affirmed in French class. After all, cisgender people do not need to do this.

The participants' recommendations gesture toward a broader critique and a call for transformation. They argued that learning gender-affirming language should not be a privilege

reserved for students who seek it out online, nor an accommodation provided only when a student discloses their identity. This insistence aligns with Kumashiro's (2000) call for anti-oppressive education that centres marginalized students through intentional, proactive teaching practices rather than reactive or individualized responses. Viewed through the lens of the study's research question, these accounts reaffirm that participants were rarely acknowledged within their French classrooms and that this invisibility shaped their sense of belonging, safety, and linguistic agency. As such, this qualitative study highlights an urgent responsibility for teacher education programs and FSL practitioners to challenge normative understandings of French, embrace gender-inclusive forms as part of the language's ongoing evolution, and continually ask: *Who is rendered impossible, or unintelligible, when French is taught only in binary terms?*

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Concluding Chapter

Discussion

Last updated in 2014, the current French-language curriculum presents a gender binary. There are some minor exceptions. Of Ontario's 32 anglophone public school boards, four (DDSB, HWDSB, OCDSB and RCDSB) have policies, procedures or guidelines that at least mention gender inclusive French. Two of those four (OCDSB RCDSB) encourage teachers to introduce students to gender-inclusive language in French. However, such encouragement relies entirely on teacher knowledge and comfort in teaching inclusive French. Only one, the RCDSB, has policy that mentions how students and staff may request to use pronouns other than "il" or "elle", recognizing the gender diversity in their schools and community.

The other 28 boards, and thus the vast majority of students, do not have any policies or documents available online that recognize gender-neutral French language, its importance in schools or how to teach it. The absence of policy guidance leaves discretion with teachers, and leaves student experiences to be dependent on whether their teacher has educated themselves on these language forms, and chooses to use them in the classroom.

At the time of this study, only four Ontario anglophone school boards explicitly addressed gender inclusivity within their policies and guidelines. In addition, the binary structure of the curriculum means that gender-neutral French is not consistently taught across anglophone FSL classrooms, and when it is introduced, it is often on an exceptional basis by individual teachers. As a result, access to gender-inclusive language becomes uneven and dependent on circumstance rather than guaranteed through public education. Learning gender-neutral French should not be a privilege available only to some students; it should be a standard part of instruction in all Ontario classrooms.

Moreover, there is a difference between curriculum expectations (set by the ministry of education) and pedagogical practices (chosen by teachers). Participants were quick to blame the curriculum for a lack of inclusion or visibility in French classrooms, but then described lessons and activities signalling the exclusion was coming from the classroom practices. Although the curriculum presents a binary, changing the curriculum alone will likely not amount to change in all classrooms. It is crucial teachers are taught how to implement inclusive French language into their practice.

All six participants did not learn inclusive French in their classrooms; some learned about "iel" online, some through friends. Granted, these interviews were conducted with participants ranging in ages from 18- to 25-year-old, from December 2022 - July 2023, so participants may have last taken a French course anywhere between the 2010-2011 school year, and the 2022-2023 school year.. For all six participants, gender-inclusive French was not part of their formal, in-class French instruction; it was something most of them learned through informal sources. Perfectly summarized by Signal, "I cannot recall a single French language teacher that brought something like that to the table."

The addition of gender-neutral pronouns and language forms in the French class is not an attempt to "out" the gender nonconforming students, but rather give the students the option to be "out" should they so choose. By teaching nothing but a gender binary, those students do not even have that option. In addition, no other student who may encounter a gender non conforming person in any part of their life, would have any idea of how to respectfully address that person. Participants showed support for inclusive French to be present in Ontario public anglophone schools. Participants felt as though being given the option to be their authentic selves and have their gender identity respected by others was a basic right that cannot be ignored any longer. Throughout these

interviews, I was reminded of the resiliency of the GNC community. Despite not learning any language that affirms their gender identity in schools, many of them had encountered "iel" online or through friends. Despite being misgendered in their French classes, some participants continued French all through high school. What every participant showed me was their desire to have inclusive French language be shared with all students, not just GNC students. Their suggestions for how to accomplish this goal are shared below.

Future Suggestions and Implications

There are a few key takeaways from this study regarding systemic change focusing on gender-inclusive and gender-neutral French language in Ontario public anglophone schools. The participants all share their ideas for how to address this issue. All six participants express a desire for the Ontario French education system to include gender-neutral French in their instruction. There is a shared hope that the Ministry of Education and individual school boards would connect with gender-diverse Francophone community members to help develop inclusive French curriculum and policy. Interviewees make it clear that for schools to keep inclusive French from students is a hurtful choice. In addition, by not teaching inclusive French and leaving any gender diverse student to learn about language that affirms their identity on their own time, is hurtful. Participants express frustration with only learning about inclusive French on their own, having to seek this information out on their own was also hurtful. Agnes suggests a three-pronged approach for systemic change involving the policy, teachers, and students. Agnes suggests enforcing teaching gender-neutral language, and teacher training to better understand the nonbinary student experience. But, as Agnes points out, "policies are very effective and teaching teachers is very effective, but there's still so many instances and examples of when both those two pillars have failed students." Agnes also wishes for more awareness of gender-neutral language among students

to help with advocacy initiatives in schools. Overall, the participants show strong support for gender-neutral French language to be taught in Ontario public anglophone schools and provided many suggestions for how to work towards including this language in schools.

Today, there is certainly no shortage of resources available for teachers wanting to enact this change. Since learning about this language, I have been passionately involved in educating teachers, current and hopeful, to better represent gender-neutral people in their French classrooms during several professional learning workshops. I have been invited to speak in teacher's education programs, as well as educating current teachers about inclusive French language. I am invited to share my story as a nonbinary person, French speaker, and educator. For most attendees, I am the first nonbinary person they know they have met, and I am the first introduction to inclusive French language. The audience often accepts new pronouns quickly, but often struggles to accept verb conjugations and adjective agreement alternatives. Most of these presentations are requested because a student has come out as gender nonconforming and teachers are struggling to make an exception in the French language. These teachers often envision themselves using this language exclusively with that student, and not with the class at large. In interviewing the participants for this study, I was reminded how important it is to be seen and represented linguistically in the language you are learning. Although it did not feel like the participants expected much from their local school boards when it came to inclusion, when asked for suggestions for improvement in this area, the ideas flowed easily from everyone. What came across clearly was the desire that these language changes were not taught exclusively on an "as needed" exception basis. All participants expressed the desire to have this language be taught wholistically, and universally. Since conducting this research, my community outreach has changed drastically. I now spend less time justifying the validity of gender diverse identities, and more time on neutral language options. I no

longer recommend selecting one pronoun or one conjugation style. Instead I now recommend starting with one, but then expanding their knowledge toward integrating more gender-neutral promising practices. I continue to question the need to teach a gender ternary and strongly support a multitude of language options in classes. And more crucially, I remind participants that this language is not only taught to the nonbinary students, but to everyone who will interact with them – in their school or in their community. Many attendees question the need for this language to be shared with every student, or question the validity of this language. These professional learning opportunities afford me opportunities to connect with the educational community and share the importance and impacts of using inclusive French language for students who may not see themselves as belonging to their respective classroom communities. The participants of this study want inclusive gender neutral French to be normalized. I hope with more professional learning opportunities that such sense of belonging will happen for future GNC students.

Limitations

This study was limited by difficulties in recruitment. The initial goal for recruitment was eight to ten participants, but after many attempts to reach qualifying participants, the study was forced to continue with six participants. This study was also limited, due to the difficulty of finding qualifying participants, the potential number of years that participants may have been in high school spans over 10 years. This is a very large range to explain a qualitative study of GNC student experience in the French classroom in Ontario.

Future Research

This research spans experiences from 2010-2023. Further research is needed to better understand what is happening in French classrooms today with regards to gender neutral French language. This research leads to numerous possible future studies to answer multiple related

questions. Is there a difference between how this issue is being addressed by French-immersion and Core French streams? What about the difference between public anglophone, Catholic anglophone, public francophone, and Catholic francophone? Is there a trend for how Catholic or public-school boards are navigating this topic? How are nonbinary French students in these boards being addressed? How is this issue being addressed in university classrooms in Ontario? What about Ontario teacher education programs? In the environments where future Ontario teachers are being instructed how to teach the French language, is this topic addressed in any way? What resources are being provided, what guidance is being offered, if any? What practices are in place in those environments? Do they differ university to university, province to province? Gender inclusivity is an issue affecting all romance languages, including Spanish and Italian. How are these languages being taught in Ontario public anglophone schools? What about in provinces where French is the dominant language? How are public schools teaching gender-inclusive French in Quebec or New Brunswick, if at all? What do board policies in those provinces say? Ministry of Education documents? Curriculum? What about other provinces where French-language instruction is not mandatory for students? In those jurisdictions, what choices are teachers making? Research on this topic is crucial to improve the lives of the citizens in Ontario and elsewhere in Canada.

Conclusion

French classrooms are where students learn how to communicate authentically in another language. Teachers are responsible for presenting language options that reflect the authentic reality of their community. To a generation of students who are increasingly identifying as gender nonconforming, this reality must be reflected in the languages learned in schools, not solely for the benefit of students who identify as GNC, but also all students who may have GNC friends,

relatives, and co-workers, and want to use language that respects them. Teachers who believe they have no authority to effect this change must be supported through professional development, administrative initiatives and school board policy change. Teachers who believe French is a historical language and cannot be changed easily must release this belief to better serve their community. The truth is, languages are how we communicate, they are powerful, and they change to suit the needs of the users. Languages that fail to respect gender diverse people can worsen mental health and increase risk of suicide. To all the French teachers who have never thought about the binary nature of the language you teach, I call on you to educate yourselves, and advocate to others. Please teach as though gender diverse communities exist, because after all, the lives of your students depend on it.

Appendices

Appendix A: Original Recruitment Poster

Appendix B: Revised Recruitment Poster

Appendix C: Revised Recruitment Text

"Have you ever taken a French course in an Ontario high school? Are you non-binary (in the broadest possible sense)? Take a short screening questionnaire to see if you qualify for a paid interview about your language learning experience: https://bit.ly/GNCFrenchStudy"

Appendix D: Interview Guide

Narrative Interview Guide

1. Where did you attend high school?
    a. What school?
    b. What school board?
2. Tell me about your French-language learning journey
3. Tell me about your gender journey
4. When did you first learn about French grammar rules?
    a. Specifically, rules following masculine and feminine conjugations, which pronouns to use when addressing a group, etc
5. How did hearing those grammar rules feel?
6. How did learning those grammar rules feel?
7. How did practicing and being evaluated on those grammar rules feel?
8. Was there any space for identities outside of the masculine/feminine binary in the classroom? Course material?

9. Are you familiar with any of the following:
    a. Écriture inclusive
    b. Gender-neutral French

10. If YES: where did you obtain this knowledge?
    a. If personal: What prompted you to explore this topic?
        i. Tell me how it felt to learn this grammar
    b. If from teacher/in school: How was this topic addressed?
    c. How did learning that this language exists feel?
    d. Have you ever asked your teacher about gender neutral French language?
        i. What was their response?
    e. Have you ever asked your administrators about gender neutral French language?
        i. What was their response?
        ii. Were any resources provided to you?

11. If NO: How did it feel to learn French in a binary-gendered way?
    a. Tell me about your feelings of safety and inclusion specifically
    b. Have you ever asked your teacher about gender neutral French language?
        i. What was their response?
    c. Have you ever asked your administrators about gender neutral French language?
        i. What was their response?
        ii. Were any resources provided to you?

12. How do you think French education in Ontario can change to be genuinely inclusive of gender-diverse people?

a. What changes would you like to see?

13. Conclude by inviting them to share with their peers to participate if they feel comfortable (snowball sampling)

Appendix E: Consent Form
Consent Form

Teaching and Learning Across the Gender Spectrum Within French-Language Instruction
…….

Researchers:

Emma Barrett, M.A. Candidate in Education, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa

Supervised by Dr. Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, Vice Dean, Graduate Programs and Full Professor, Faculty of Education.
Tel.# 613-562-5800, extension 4407 / nngafook@uottawa.ca

Funding: This project is funded by the Canada Graduate Scholarships Master's (CGS M) program from the Tri-Agency council: the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Emma Barrett and supervised by Nicholas Ng-A-Fook, PhD..

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to explore how gender non-conforming (GNC) students experienced learning French as a second language in Ontario.

Participation: My participation will consist of one interview session that will last approximately 60-90 minutes and that will be conducted on Zoom. The interviewer will ask me about my educational experience, both positive and negative, with regards to learning French and my gender identity. I will also be asked to complete a demographic screening questionnaire prior to the interview. Following the interview, I will be asked to verify the interview transcript for accuracy, intended meaning, and comfort with regards to experiences shared. The transcripts will be sent to me within one week of the interview, and I will be given two weeks to review and verify them.

Risks: There are emotional risks involved in participating in this study. My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer personal information. I might feel some discomfort (anxiety or sadness) when recalling harmful moments during my schooling experience or when thinking of the stigma towards gender diverse people. If this is the case, the following crisis intervention services are available to me:

- **Wellness Together Canada** provides free, phone-based counselling. This non-emergency service is available 24/7. Call 1-866-585-0445 or text "wellness" to 741741
- **Distress and Crisis Ontario** provides chat- and text-based support from 2PM to 2AM daily. Chat online at DCOntario.org, or text "support" to 258258

- **Trans Lifeline** provides peer support to trans people. The helpline is open 24/7, but operators are only guaranteed from 5 PM to 1 AM. Call 1-877-330-6366 to speak with a peer support volunteer. For more information and resources, visit TransLifeline.org

Example: As this study explores topics related to identity, visibility in language learning environment, as well as potential positive and negative experiences in the classroom, the following is an example of a potential interview question: "Could you tell me about your gender journey?" If I have further questions related to the potential interview topics more specifically, the researcher has assured me they are available to discuss openly.

Benefits: My participation in this study will allow me to reflect upon my experience with gender diversity while learning the French language. Other benefits will be mostly indirect; my responses will contribute to the accumulation of knowledge related to harmful and helpful teaching practices. This knowledge will be used for the betterment of educational and teaching practices generally for GNC students in French-language-learning environments. This research may inform educators and policy makers in Ontario to better and more accurately represent GNC learners in French classrooms.

Confidentiality: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. My responses to all questionnaires and interview questions will be kept private. My name will be replaced by an ID number (for data collection) or a pseudonym (in the analysis and written reports). All other personal identifiers, such as names of schools or teachers, will be modified or replaced. I will select pronouns of my choice for when the researcher refers to me in their written work. At no point in the written reports and publications of this research will my real name be used.

Consent to record: I understand that the interview will be audio-taped and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. If I choose to participate in the interview by using the chat function, the chat history will be retained for the purpose of data analysis. The interview will also be videotaped when applicable. The video will be used to clarify any unclear verbal exchanges.

Conservation of data: The data collected via the interview and questionnaires will be kept in a secure manner. The audio and video recordings, questionnaires, transcripts, and demographic data will be stored in password-protected files on a USB external hard drive, stored securely in the researcher's office (Emma Barrett). Only the two researchers involved in the study will have access to these materials. The data will be stored for eight years, and will be securely disposed of following the end of this time period.

Compensation: Parcipants will receive a $25 gift card to a store of their choice, so long as there is an option for online purchase of a gift card. I will receive this token of appreciation when and if I am chosen for participation. Participants are chosen based on eligibility criteria set out in the screening questionnaire, and based on a first-come first-served basis. If I choose to withdraw from the study after being chosen for participation, I will still receive this gift.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering

any negative consequences. If I withdraw participation or refuse to answer questions, I will still receive the financial token of appreciation as outlined above. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered prior to the withdrawal will be destroyed.

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Emma Barrett, under the supervision of Nicholas Ng-A-Fook from the Faculty of Education.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researchers.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON, K1N 6N5

Tel.: (613) 562-5387
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

I may keep a copy of this consent form for my records.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix F: Screening Questionnaire

Teaching and Learning Across the Gender Spectrum Within French-Language Instruction

Screening Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in participation! Please complete and return this screening questionnaire within one week. This will determine your eligibility to participate in this study.

This research project is supervised by Dr. Nicholas Ng-A-Fook (nngafook@uottawa.ca) and has received approbation by the University of Ottawa's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (613-562-5387, ethics@uottawa.ca) file number S-11-22-8649.

Important note!
No matter your ultimate level of participation in this study, your answers to these questions will remain confidential. Please contact the researcher, Emma Barrett (they/them/al) with any questions, comments, or concerns.

1. Are you between the ages of 18-25?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

2. Do you speak English fluently?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

3. Do you identify as non-binary and/or gender non-conforming and/or gender diverse in any way?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

4. Did you attend elementary and secondary school in Ontario?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

5. Were you enrolled in a public school board?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

6. Were you enrolled in an English school board?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

7. Did you take at least one French course in high school? (Core, extended, or immersion?)

   Yes ☐ No ☐

   If yes, which French program? (select all that apply)

   ☐ Core French

   ☐ Extended French

   ☐ French Immersion

8. Did you take French in elementary school? (Core, extended, immersion, full French)

   Yes ☐ No ☐

   If yes, which French program? (select all that apply)

   ☐ Core French

   ☐ Extended French

   ☐ French Immersion

   ☐ Full French

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