

Exploring the Effectiveness and Impact of the MHSAA Policy on Transgender Students: Learning from the Experiences of Trans- Youth in Manitoba High Schools

In February 2015, the Manitoba High Schools Athletic Association (MHSAA) enacted a one sentence *Policy on Transgender Students*: “Any transgender student athlete may participate fully and safely in sex-separated sports activities in accordance with his or her gender identity.” Policy addresses some but not all of the problems of discrimination that minority groups experience (Lenskyj, 2003). Policies such as the MHSAA policy have been created in the interest of positively impacting sport for people who have largely been excluded.

This Master’s research aimed to better understand the daily experiences of trans- youth in Manitoba high schools by listening to and learning from trans- youth directly, and analyzing the impact of this MHSAA policy. The research asked: 1) how do trans- youth in Manitoba navigate and experience high school sports, and 2) what, if any, are the impacts of the new MHSAA policy for trans- youth?

This research was grounded in the understanding that trans- youth are “the best experts on their own experiences and lives” (Short, 2013, p. 5) and that the knowledges they articulate are worthy, imperative, and fundamental. As there is very little research that considers the experiences of trans- youth in sport, it is crucial to provide space for trans- youth to have a voice in “making changes in the environments they navigate, to support their being and their becoming, their growth and their transition to adulthood” (Veale et al., 2015, p. 71) rather than speaking on behalf of, and ultimately excluding, trans- youth.

This research was approved by the University of Manitoba Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB) and included two main methods: 1) open-ended semi-structured interviews with MHSAA stakeholders who helped create this policy, and 2) interactive semi-structured interviews with trans- youth to hear firsthand accounts of their experiences and opinions of high school sport in Manitoba, and whether or not the newly enacted policy makes an impact within their everyday high school lives.

Five interviews were conducted with stakeholders involved in the policy development: Morris Glimcher, Chad Falk, Scott Kwasnitza, Reece Malone, and Paul Paquin, all of whom as public figures chose not to use pseudonyms. The narrative of the policy developed from these 5 interviews were supported by an analysis of selected MHSAA Annual General Meeting Notice of Motions, Board of Directors’ Meeting Minutes (2014-16), and selected media texts (2014-16).

Interviews with MHSAA Policy Stakeholders

1) Policy Motivations

- Initially, stakeholders wanted to be proactive in creating the policy and aligning it with other Manitoba policies, such as *Bill 18*
- There was a desire to avoid accusations of discrimination from trans- students and their allies
- As the policy was being developed and policy consultations continued, the desire to create safe, respectful sport environments for trans- students became a priority and primary focus
- Main goals of creating the policy: varying perspectives, but all 5 took time to mention inclusion, safety, and respect as motivations to create the policy in one form or another

2) Policy Preparation and Creation

- Limited information publicly available about the preparation and creation of the policy
- Consultations with other organizations and stakeholders was critical in developing the policy, gaining education on the topic of trans- people in sport, and minimizing the possibility of

developing a disjointed policy

- Responses were mixed when asked if trans- youth were consulted during the policy creation
 - Aside from drawing on research informed by trans- youth, there was an omission of the voices of trans- students in policy creation discussions
- 3) Policy Implementation
- Media was discussed as an important strategy in sharing the new policy to the public
 - After searching numerous media sites, there are only 2 articles written about the creation and implementation of the policy
 - Reliance on a rippling effect strategy of spreading the policy: the MHSAA would share the final policy with other stakeholders and organizations and it would trickle down to additional associations who would then, presumably, share it with their networks
- 4) Post-policy Implementation
- Since policy enactment, conversations between stakeholders have been non-existent
 - At the MHSAA Board level, no further discussions about the policy since its enactment
 - The policy has not been inquired about by MHSAA member schools, parents, coaches, or students, but more so by external bodies and organizations
 - With the policy in place, safety of school athletic spaces more broadly must be considered

Interviews with Trans- Youth

As directed by ENREB, youth participants had to be 16 or older to participate. Participants had to be enrolled in a Manitoba high school, they could participate in sport or not, and identify their gender in any type of transgressive way.

Four interviews were conducted with trans- youth: Roy Hamilton, Kevin, Jane, and Charlie Hides (pseudonyms). One participant was in grade 10, 2 were in grade 11, and 1 was in grade 12. Two participants were located in rural contexts and 2 in urban contexts. One participant identifies their race as white, 2 students identify as Aboriginal (one of whom used the terms Aboriginal and Native interchangeably), and 1 student did not identify their race.

None of the 4 students were involved in high school sport at the time of our interviews and none have participated in sports during their time in high school, aside from Roy Hamilton who briefly tried out for a softball team but quickly stopped participating. All 4, however, were enrolled in mandatory gym class. Direct quotes from trans- youth are included below.

MHSAA Policy:

- All 4 discussed a lack of awareness of the MHSAA policy for students and teachers: None of the 4 students knew of the policy prior to this research
 - 3 of the youth would have attempted to join sports if they knew about the policy, or if a policy had been developed sooner; they would be more comfortable in sports, have more skills in sports overall, and feel more comfortable trying out for sports teams
 - 3 would be more likely to participate in school sports if sports teams were a mix of all genders, and the fourth student did not have any interest in sport
- “I feel like I’m probably missing some of the things that happen on sports teams. [. . .] Every other team is divided by gender so I don’t feel like I could join either team and be comfortable.” **(Jane)**

- “I don’t really think it [the MHSAA policy] has [helped] so far because I never knew about it till now so I was just pretty much really oblivious to it. If I knew about it sooner maybe I probably would have joined the boys team like a long time ago.” **(Kevin)**
- “I think it [the policy] would [help trans- students play on sports teams], I think it helps protect them in a sense but I don’t know if it helps them play cause they can let you on the team, it’s just a matter of them putting you on the field. [. . .] Like, ‘welcome to the team, warm the bench’.” **(Roy Hamilton)**
- “It’s good to have legal backing but seeing that one phrase does not actually make me wanna join a sports team or feel like that I could.” **(Jane)**

Schools:

- Youth participants differed in their responses to levels of support felt within their schools. All 4 discussed desires to have conversations with their teachers about identity, including gym teachers, but that this desire is often overshadowed by a fear of not knowing how teachers may respond if students disclose their identities
- All 4 shared uncomfortable feelings associated with high school sport related spaces, such as washrooms and change rooms
- 3 of the 4 spend much of their school days finding isolated spaces to 1) use the washroom and 2) change for gym class
- Because high school sports mainly offer only 2 gender-based teams, Jane expressed a frustration of having to choose between not joining a team at all or joining a team that does not align with their gender
- “I just kinda don’t like being in the change rooms that much cause it’s just kind of, I do my best to try to avoid going to use female washrooms or like female change rooms, so I kind of just like never go.” **(Kevin)**
- “I try my best to participate [in gym class] even though I feel there’s like sometimes restrictions on what I can do. [. . .] I can’t use either of the change rooms. It’s not that I can’t, I don’t want to. So like we do have neutral washrooms here but like they’re these little one stall rooms all the way across the school from the gym so I have to change and then like run all the way to the gym and then do it again if I have to like change again.” **(Jane)**
- “There’s like zero support [for trans- students regarding gender] [. . .] it’s not a great environment. I dunno, the way I often sum it up in my head sometimes is: I love my school, my school does not love me.” **(Jane)**

Recommendations from Trans- Youth

For policy recommendations, youth call for:

- More identities and people who live outside of or beyond binary frameworks included in the policy statement, such as non-binary and gender non-conforming students. The policy language uses only binary her/his pronouns in the statement and is therefore limited
 - The omission of gender identities outside of her/his leads to the belief that non-binary and gender non-conforming students are not protected by the policy, and that students

must continue to fit into and align with a binary sport system rather than creating a system with all youth in mind

- An outlined process to ensure the policy, and students accessing the policy, are supported
- Move past simply stating that trans- students can join sports by implementing measures to ensure social change accompanies this policy
 - Work with schools to address the school recommendations youth participants call for, listed below
- Re-introduce and provide policy access to all administration and teachers across Manitoba

For school recommendations, youth call for:

- Mandatory school-wide educative events on trans- and queer topics
- More awareness and support from teachers on gender-related, trans-, and queer topics
- Teachers open and willing to talk about the MHSAA policy in classes (i.e., gym class)
- A complete restructuring of gym class to move away from organizing activities by gender
- Accountability of divisions, schools, administration, and teachers that do not support or advocate for the MHSAA policy and the students impacted by this policy
- Post the policy (current MHSAA policy and then future updated policy) around schools, such as in gyms—a space recognized by students as one of few school spaces that do not have safe space indications
- Begin considerations and discussions of providing multiple gender options for sports teams

Even with the *MHSAA Policy on Transgender Students* in place, recognizing the desires and attempts of the MHSAA to create an inclusive and respectful policy, the onus remains on trans-students to navigate binary organization of sport in their schools in ways other students do not have to and ultimately take for granted.

Youth participants acknowledge that necessary social changes to accompany the policy are not taking place in their schools for such a policy to be effective. Introducing policy alone will not change entire school climates nor allow access to sports for all students. The recommendations provided by youth begin to address the need for change within schools in order to increase the effectiveness of the MHSAA policy and to contribute to trans- students feeling greater support overall. From hearing the voices and experiences of trans- youth directly impacted by the policy, policy enhancements and social changes within schools must be seriously considered.
