

## **Practicum Courses & Placements**

Teacher education relies on practicum for the important in-school experience it provides. This module addresses the significant general implications for 2SLGBTQ+ Education students that are worth considering in selecting practicum placements and how coordinators, placement officers, and instructors can support their 2SLGBTQ+ pre-service education students.

*Note:* Courses that accompany practica are usually methods-themed courses that focus on curriculum, evaluation and assessment, instruction, and various content areas. We offer more detailed modules focusing on methods courses and each of the various content areas (such as language arts, math, etc.) [here in our K–12 Methods Modules](#).

### **What does it mean to queer practicum for teacher education students?**

Queering practicum for teacher education students means creating safe, equitable, and transparent support systems for 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates as they enter into the practicum experience. Practicum as it exists now within post-secondary institutions in Canada has teacher candidates enter into a dynamic with supervising teachers which may impact their teaching careers, and 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates often find themselves hiding their identities within practicum or potentially facing discrimination from supervising teachers/administration or the students in the classroom. Queering practicum means working to ensure that 2SLGBTQ+ students are not placed in schools or with supervising teachers who may oppose their right not to hide their gender or sexual identity. Finally, queering practicum also means challenging the assumption of Education students, teachers, and faculty advisors that it is inappropriate for teachers to be openly 2SLGBTQ+ at school, or that they should not be placed within particular religious or culturally-based schools. Ultimately, any placement should involve a conversation with 2SLGBTQ+ pre-service teachers to determine their own unique needs, desires, and circumstances. It is imperative that a safe, inclusive, and supportive placement is negotiated for these students as the practicum experience is foundational to their success as an undergraduate student and a future teacher.

### **Why do we need to do this?**

Often, queer and trans teacher candidates are required or forced to conceal their identity for success within practicum or they are placed in difficult, unsafe placement positions. Trans or gender non-conforming students are put in particularly precarious positions where they may be exposed to unsupportive or hostile treatment for their identity or gender expression. Sometimes this involves supervising teachers or schools that are unsupportive or unprepared for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals; sometimes it involves classrooms where the prevailing practice is to conceal or not address sexual orientation and gender identity. For some students, the stress, risks and damage of an unsupportive or hostile placement far outweigh any benefits of the practicum experience.

Unsupportive or negative experiences in placement, or even apprehensions about possible negative experiences, can cause attrition or negatively impact the success of a student. This contributes to the under-representation of queer/trans folks in teaching placements, and by extension the under-representation of queer/trans folks in teaching positions. Many queer teacher candidates receive inequitably unfavourable reviews from supervising teachers, which can impact their ability to be hired as substitutes or receive term positions once they have graduated. Having more queer teachers and openly queer teachers will enhance the educational experiences of queer students. Jennings (2015) also notes that the inclusion of a multitude of 2SLGBTQ+ identities and experiences represented within teacher education programs may help “prepare teachers to support youth, conforming and nonconforming alike, to transform their school circumstances, rather than wait for more supportive circumstances after they finish school” (p. 456).

It is also important for heterosexual and cisgender teachers to learn about and deeply understand the barriers that 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates face within practicum. These issues continue after practicum into teaching practice, where queer teachers historically have faced ongoing homo/bi/transphobic behaviour and/or prejudicial treatment (Irwin, 2002; see also Kearns et al., 2017). Heterosexual and cisgender teachers should be more cognizant of these issues so that when they are teachers themselves, or even practicum supervisors, they are able to participate in dismantling these discriminatory practices.

### How do we do it?

- *Pre-practicum groundwork.* In recognizing the barriers that 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates may experience in practicum situations, there is an opportunity for practicum advisors and coordinators to lay the groundwork for a more supportive placement experience. Speaking openly about concerns regarding personal identity in placement (including intersectional identities) will help students feel comfortable voicing their concerns either with the group or individually.
- *Name the difficult experiences.* Supporting 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates in their placements means naming the micro- and macro-aggressions they may face, and declaring them unacceptable. Avoiding the discussion may make 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates feel less supported or more uncomfortable bringing these experiences to faculty. Placement supervisors need to connect with supervising teachers and ensure clear professional and ethical expectations are established. If there is a faculty GSA, they could be involved in practicum discussions, and in creating policies and procedures to better support 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates.
- *Get to know the schools and divisions that the students are working with before placement begins.* Unpack some of the conflicts that students have had with supervising teachers, unsupportive schools, students, and parents in accompanying courses, especially regarding the frequently unaddressed and unacknowledged themes of sexual orientation and gender identity underlying some conflicts.

- *Challenge norms.* Faculty supervisors, instructors, and supervising teachers too often neglect to address conflicts as they arise, assuming that it will “work out,” or consider navigating unsafe environments to be part of the profession. Neglecting the very real personal impacts on 2SLGBTQ+ students can often result in their withdrawal from teacher education programs and/or the profession as a whole, and compounds the problem of leaving heteronormative and cisnormative education systems/structures unchanged and removing potential 2SLGBTQ+ candidates from the profession. The absence of visible 2SLGBTQ+ teachers also denies 2SLGBTQ+ students important role models and trusted adults within the school system.
- *Placement selections.* While we recognize that organizing practica for hundreds of students is an exceptionally difficult administrative process, there are opportunities to identify supportive supervising teachers and schools to match 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates on practicum. This introduces another layer to the placement process, but the benefit in identifying safe placements has the potential to support students far more comprehensively. Many practicum coordinators already take into account a preference for placement at a Catholic or public school, and this additional layer of care for 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates can help ensure an equitable practicum experience.
  - *Note:* This is not to suggest that a Catholic school environment is inherently unsafe for 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates. It is a reminder to try to avoid assumptions about which schools will be safe or unsafe spaces, and instead to be aware of all contexts and individual experiences.
- *Transparent reporting protocols.* While most universities have a mechanism for addressing concerns with supervising teachers and teacher candidates, these processes are not always clear or explicit to the candidates. Before a teacher candidate has a difficult practicum experience, create a comprehensive set of protocols for teacher candidates to follow if they are in a placement that is unsupportive or prejudiced against them. Having clearly defined mechanisms for accountability for supervising teachers will ensure candidates feel comfortable bringing up their human rights or other concerns. These mechanisms should also include easy solutions that will not negatively impact the teacher candidate (such as new practicum placements, alternative assignments, etc.).
- *Networks of support.* Create a network of colleagues in the school system who are either queer and/or trans themselves, or strong allies to the 2SLGBTQ+ community and ensure teacher candidates know they are able to reach out to these individuals for support at any time during their placements. This is not necessarily about formal mentorship roles but rather a cooperative mentorship community. Mentors do not have to be older or more experienced educators. Build stronger relationships with placement schools that have queer and trans friendly faculty and create opportunities for 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates to have multiple placements in those schools (Ferfolja, 2008).
- *Ongoing training and re-training.* Require ongoing training and re-training for any teacher that will be acting as a supervising or cooperating teacher or school liaison. This training should not only include queer issues, but should also include discussion on

Indigenous perspectives, anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Black racism, white supremacy, and other themes that are often involved in a hostile placement in sometimes overlapping and interlocking oppression.

- *Imagine an alternative.* Practicum has existed in its current form for many years. Consider alternative forms of “placement” or doing away with teaching placements altogether.

## Teaching Activities

*(for Practicum Coordinator or Faculty Advisor)*

### **Ask Yourself: Have I created a practicum experience that is safe and supportive for 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates?**

Read through this series of questions and think about how the placement experience for your teacher candidates compares. For a deeper reflection process, use the questions as a writing prompt. These may also be questions that you wish to bring to supervising teachers and administrators at schools that are accepting teacher candidates. Use your reflections as content in courses and conversations with teacher candidates before and during placements to provide them with supports grounded in your faculty and reflective of their placements.

1. Are 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates reflected in all aspects of our teacher education program? Can 2SLGBTQ+ students see themselves in promotional materials, university websites, student handbooks and regulations?
2. Do we use “he” and “she” in written materials from the school, or have we begun to use more gender-inclusive language such as “they,” which is accepted by several academic publication manuals and dictionaries (such as [APA](#), [Oxford dictionary](#), etc.)?
3. Does our new-student orientation include introductions to the faculty GSA and other 2SLGBTQ+ resources at the university? Is this information also provided at the faculty orientation? How are you building and communicating networks of support?
4. Do we have a reporting mechanism for 2SLGBTQ+ teacher candidates to use if they find themselves concerned about or located in a hostile placement? Is this mechanism explained to the students pre-emptively, and publicly available online, and are students protected from retaliation if they use the reporting mechanism?
5. Has the faculty offered opportunities for B.Ed. instructors to discuss the issues facing queer students in practica, how to support them, and why it is important to support their entrance into the profession? Are you providing professional learning opportunities about 2SLGBTQ+ identities?
6. Are supervising teachers and administrators chosen with particular attention paid to their use of gender-inclusive, queer friendly, and anti-racist pedagogies? Are expectations of equal treatment for all practicum participants made clear to supervising

teachers? Are there consequences for supervising teachers who do not meet these expectations?

7. In classes preparing students for practicum, are 2SLGBTQ+ individuals referred to frequently and in a variety of ways in examples, either provided by the instructor or in the chosen texts? Do these examples of 2SLGBTQ+ people rely on popular tropes (i.e., gay men can play sports too) or are a variety of 2SLGBTQ+ experiences represented?

## References

- Ferfolja, T. (2008). Making the transition into the first year of teaching: Lessons from the Classmates initiative. *Australian Journal of Education*, 52(3), 242–256.
- Irwin, J. (2002). Discrimination against gay men, lesbians, and transgender people working in education. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 14(2), 65–77.  
[https://doi.org/10.1300/J041v14n02\\_06](https://doi.org/10.1300/J041v14n02_06)
- Jennings, T. (2015). Teaching transgressive representations of LGBTQ people in educator preparation: Is conformity required for inclusion? *The Educational Forum*, 79(4), 451–458. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2015.1068420>
- Kearns, L.-L., Mitton-Kükner, J., & Tompkins, J. (2017). Transphobia and cisgender privilege: Pre-service teachers recognizing and challenging gender rigidity in schools. *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue Canadienne de l'éducation*, 40(1), 1–27.  
<https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/2367>