

**GENDER-INCLUSIVE REGISTRATION FOR YOUTH SOCCER:
A CASE STUDY**

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A thesis submitted
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

MANAGEMENT (Policy and Strategy)

Dhillon School of Business
University of Lethbridge
LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA, CANADA

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Date of Defense: April 27th, 2022

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DEDICATION

To my husband, Paul. You never let me quit, brought me endless cups of coffee and never tired of hearing, “Can you read these pages?”.

ABSTRACT

This case study assessed the lived experiences of staff and volunteers following the implementation of a gender-inclusive registration policy at a youth soccer club. Policymakers at other youth soccer clubs, the provincial and national organizations were also interviewed to add to the depth of the landscape regarding policy development and implementation.

Results showed that while policy development, including language, is still in its early stages, decision-makers at all levels were open to discussing the topic and their lived experiences. Policies set by these organizations are used as examples by other youth sports to aid in their respective inclusivity policy development.

PREFACE

The topic of this research is both timely and polarizing. Parents of youth athletes are passionate about both the game and their children's success. Decision-makers at the provincial and national levels in youth sports are developing inclusivity policies through the lenses of their organizations. This research looks at the efforts that have been made by youth organizations, their players and parents and technical staff. It is a first look at the effects of existing inclusive gender-based registration policies and the thoughts and ideas behind emerging inclusive registration policies.

Ethics approval was sought and obtained through the University of Lethbridge.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research phase of this study happened amid the COVID 19 pandemic and the many shutdowns. Devoid of the communal support of my cohort, my thesis supervisor, Dr. Robbin Derry, filled in with unwavering grace and determination. Without her belief, support and urging, this study would not have been completed.

I also acknowledge the efforts of the board of directors of the McKenzie United Soccer Club. This forward-thinking group of volunteers wholly endorsed both the change to a gender-identity-based registration policy and the study of its effects.

Last but not least, I acknowledge the kids and their incredible families. Such bravery, unconditional love and support are inspirational.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASA	Alberta Soccer Association
CCES	Canadian Center for Ethics in Sport
CMSA	Calgary Minor Soccer Association
CONCACAF	Confederation of North and Central American and Caribbean Association Football
FIFA	Federation Internationale de Football Association
IAAF	International Association of Athletics Federation
IOC	International Olympic Committee
LGBTQ2S+	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans Queer 2-Spirit plus
LTAD	Long Term Athlete Development
MMA	Mixed Martial Arts
MUSC	McKenzie United Soccer Club
PTSO	Provincial and Territorial Sports Organizations
TGNC	Trans and Gender Non-Conforming

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Football (aka Soccer) is often referred to as “the beautiful game” [o Jogo bonito]. The term was popularized by the Brazilian footballer Pele, although the exact origin of the phrase is disputed. Stuart Hall, an English football commentator, used it as far back as 1958 (Contributors-Wikipedia, 2022). It is played at international, national, provincial, and local levels in grassy areas or gravel alleys. It is the most-watched sport globally, with an estimated base of 3.5 to 4 billion viewers. And like the fictional Quidditch, soccer is a unifying agent throughout the world for people of all ages and backgrounds.

My research has shown that many youth sports groups fast-track organizational policies for inclusivity, especially those applied to youth sports. The overall intent is to have as many children play the game as possible, but the pathway to achieving the goal of increased player enrolment through inclusivity is not clear. The lack of clarity can lead to confusion about rules, fair play and equal opportunities. My research broadly looks at how the sport of youth soccer has begun to address and deliver inclusivity policies aimed at Trans and Gender Non-Conforming youth athletes. Additionally, the study looks at the effects of a gender-identity-based registration process implemented at one youth soccer club – McKenzie United Soccer Club (MUSC). MUSC is a youth soccer club based in southeast Calgary in Alberta, Canada. Since its foundation in 1993, the club has been an integral part of the communities south and east of the Bow River. Along with my four children, I have been a part of the club since 1998. We have been players and coaches. I have been a member of the board of directors, club president and general manager – the position I currently hold—the club rosters approximately 2200 players between 3 years to 17 years in a typical year.

In late 2018, MUSC was contacted by two families. Each family had a child, who wanted to play soccer, but no longer identified with their birth gender. They wanted to know if their child could play on the “other gender-based team” and how to register them. Eager to accommodate this request, the club did an extensive search among provincial clubs to find examples of how to facilitate the inclusion of a trans youth soccer player and what repercussions the club might expect from parents, other clubs, and the governing bodies.

As the general manager of MUSC and a coach myself, I began to ask, “how does an organization become inclusive of trans youth or register the player’s profile”? How does the process evolve? Finding no available answers from other clubs’ policies, the board of directors decided to adopt a newly proposed gender-based registration process, despite the lack of research. This study addresses that dearth of research through a case study of the club and the effects of the new registration process.

1.1 BACKGROUND OF LGBTQ2S+ AND SPORT

A critical examination of how professional athletes voice support for Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-Queer-Two-Spirit and Ally (LGBTQ2S+) teammates supports the idea that inclusive sport is not a fairy-tale. In 2013, U.S. National Football League players DeMario Davis, Kirk Cousins, and Adrian Peterson all publicly stated they would welcome an openly gay player on their teams. However, each also qualified their response: Davis equated homosexuality with drunkenness, and Cousins equated it with prostitution; Peterson was concerned that having a gay teammate would make interactions in the locker room (e.g., showering) uncomfortable. Thus, although each

player initially voiced pro-LGBTQ2S+ sentiments, they also made derogatory statements, casting sexual minorities as sinful and promiscuous (Buzinski, 2013; Peterson, 2013). Media stories documenting the experiences of transgender and intersex athletes have highlighted both the challenges Trans and Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC) athletes face and sports' inadequate policies concerning their inclusion (Torres, Lopez Frias, & Patiño, 2022) (Cunningham & Melton, 2014). For example:

- Middle-distance runner Caster Semenya: World Athletics passed guidelines in 2018 that require female athletes with “differences in sexual development” to reduce testosterone levels through medical procedures to compete in the 400-meter, 800-meter, 1500-meter and 1-mile events (Federation, 2018). Semenya, an intersex cisgender woman from South Africa, was assigned female at birth and had naturally higher testosterone levels. The policy change, in effect, restricts Semenya from competing in several events. Because of the rule, Semenya would be unable to vie for a third consecutive Olympic gold medal in the 800-meter event at the Tokyo 2021 Olympic Games. A Court of Arbitration for Sport ruling in 2020 upheld the rules drafted by Track and Field’s governing body affecting female runners with differences of sex development (DSD) (Holzer, 2020). It meant Semenya could not defend her Olympic 800-meter title at the Tokyo Games — or compete at any top meets in distances from 400 meters to the mile — unless she agreed to lower her testosterone level through medication or surgery.
- MMA fighter Fallon Fox: Fallon Fox came out as transgender in March 2013, after her two initial professional MMA fights. Controversy surrounded the

licensing requirements for MMA fighters. It led commentators to speculate on the issue of whether a woman who was assigned male at birth should be able to fight in the women's divisions in MMA fighting. "Game Face" is a documentary based on Fox's MMA career during the controversy (Contributors-Wikipedia, 2021) (McClearen, 2015).

- Hammer thrower Keelin Godsey: Keelin Godsey was the first openly transgender athlete to compete for a spot on the United States Olympic team. Godsey was assigned female at birth, has openly identified as male since 2005 and competed in women's hammer throw competitions at the London Olympics in 2012. (Staff, 2012) ("Keelin Godsey Could Be First Ever Transgender Athlete To Represent U.S. In Olympics," 2012)
- CrossFit competitor Chloe Jonsson (Bried, 2015): As a transgender athlete, Jonsson was assigned male at birth but identified as female. At the age of 16, she began hormone therapy and then, at 25 years of age, opted for gender reassignment surgery. In 2013, while training for the CrossFit Games, she "outed" herself to CrossFit, which then disqualified her. In their letter, CrossFit stated:

We have simply ruled that based upon [Chloe] being born as a male, she will need to compete in the Men's Division."

"The fundamental, ineluctable fact is that a male competitor with a sex reassignment procedure still has a genetic makeup that confers a physical and physiological advantage over women."

It states, "Our decision has nothing to do with 'ignorance' or being bigots — it has to do with a genuine understanding of the human genome, of fundamental biology, that you are either intentionally ignoring or missed in high school." (Busey, 2014)

Society has come to accept and expect tiered policies that endorse gender segregation, such as:

- Tennis: Women’s Grand Slam events only play a best of three sets, while Men’s Grand Slam events play a best of five sets.
- Golf: Women golfers on the LPGA (Ladies Professional Golfers Association) play shorter holes by hitting different tees. The LPGA also has other sponsors, fans, and locations – all somewhat “less” than the men’s tour.
- FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football) – the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil was broadcast in 207 countries and territories, with an estimated viewership of ~3.2 billion. The following year, the 2015 FIFA Women’s World Cup, hosted by Canada, was broadcast to 37 countries with an estimated viewership of ~750 million.

Most existing sport governance policies perpetuate the belief that female athletic achievements are “less” – range not as far; the weight not as heavy, and the bar not as high – as male athletic achievements. Therefore, competitions between male and female athletes or mixed-gender teams are not fair or equitable.

Concomitantly, most policies further reinforce a divide between cisgender athletes (those whose gender identity or expression matches their assigned-at-birth sex) and those whose gender does not conform to the traditional male and female cisgender binary. Furthermore, the ethical rationale for these policies – that athletes can participate if they achieve and demonstrate physiological equivalency with cisgender athletes – reflects the disempowerment and marginalization of TGNC athletes and the misinterpretation of their sporting accomplishments (Gleaves & Lehrbach, 2016).

Sports federations have adopted athlete participation contracts that govern the conditions under which each athlete can compete. The regulations and pre-conditions in the contracts supposedly safeguard against cheating and ensure equality and fair play. In his 2005 article, Reeser discusses the origins of the International Olympic Committee's gender verification process and how they have evolved to today's current contentious process.

“The initial accounts of men masquerading as women to compete for the laurels of victory date back to the early cold war period, an era when athletic achievement became a source of both personal and national pride, prestige, and reward. Although much of the available “evidence” is anecdotal and circumstantial, there is reason to suspect that such sex fraud may have been systematically perpetrated for political gain dating back to the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

... the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) intervened to protect track and field from the reoccurrence of similar transgressions [men masquerading as women] by requiring that the female participants in the 1966 European Track and Field Championships parade naked before a panel of female doctors to confirm their ‘femininity.’ Although all 243 athletes who submitted to this private humiliation passed, six athletes from a single Eastern bloc delegation suddenly withdrew from the competition, precipitating considerable speculation and rumormongering.

Over the succeeding two years, verification of gender became a part of the pre-competition protocol for female track and field athletes, and in 1968 the IOC followed suit by requiring that all female athletes produce proof of their gender to be permitted to participate in the Mexico City Summer Olympic Games. Although the accepted methodology of sex testing would evolve, in one form or another, such gender verification was performed before every subsequent Olympics, until the IOC finally suspended the practice before the [2000] Sydney Summer Games.” (Reeser, 2005, p. 696).

Since the 2000s, the IOC has trialled, adopted, and rejected several procedures for gender verification, from the “cheek scraping” Barr test to the polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test and more. Regrettably, for the IOC and IAAF (and fortunately for the TGNC

community), the processes have raised more questions about gender than they have resolved. Regardless, the IOC and the IAAF maintain that intersex women athletes do not belong in the women's category because their intersex condition gives them an unfair physical advantage over cisgender women. Conversely, literature shows researchers have defended the inclusion of both intersex and transgender athletes based on physiological equivalency, stating that there is no current scientific evidence supporting the notion of a straightforward or predictable advantage due to endogenous testosterone (Gleaves & Lehrbach, 2016). It is an intrinsic belief for the spectator and the athlete that (i) competitive participants are on a level playing field, and (ii) the match/game is a comparative test between equal competitors. However, sport governance policies give preference to athletes perceived to be capable of achieving “more” – being bigger, better, stronger, and faster. The flawed belief in the anatomical advantage of the cisgender male athlete affects contracts, player waivers, and disclaimers and unfairly disadvantages or completely excludes others.

1.2 TERMINOLOGY

It is essential to note the terms sex and gender are not synonyms. This study uses the definitions listed below (Ainsworth, 2016) (Fausto-Sterling, 2012) (Morris & Van Raalte, 2016).

- **Assigned Sex** refers to the biological differences between males and females. The assignment of biological sex, usually assigned at birth, is based on the appearance of external sex organs or through the assessment of chromosome and hormone levels.

- **Cisgender** means that a person's sex assigned at birth matches their gender identity and the socially expected norms of that gender (assigned male at birth and identifies as a male)
- **Gender** refers to the continuum of complex psychosocial self-perceptions, attitudes, and expectations people have about members of both sexes.
- **Gender Expression** is how gender is presented and communicated to the world through clothing, speech, body language, hairstyle, voice, and the emphasis or de-emphasis of body characteristics and behaviours.
- **Gender Identity** refers to a person's deeply-felt to-the-bottom-of-your-soul knowledge of their gender, which may or may not match their sex assigned at birth. Transgender people may recognize their own gender identity at any point in their lives.
- **Sex and Gender Binary** is the notion that there are only two possible sexes (male and female) and genders (man and woman) and that they are opposite, distinct, and uniform categories. This view also asserts that gender is determined by sex.
- **Trans and Gender Non-Conforming (TGNC)** refers to persons who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth. Some, but not all, TGNC people undergo different forms of physical or social transitions to look, feel, and be seen in ways consistent with their gender identity.
- **Transition** is the process by which a trans individual seeks to achieve consistency with their gender identity, which may, but does not necessarily, include changing the person's body through hormones with or without surgical

procedures. It is essential to recognize that the transition to living consistently with one's gender identity can look different for each person. For many, the transition process involves some combination of social transition, hormonal transition, and/or surgical transition.

- **Transitioning** refers to a host of activities that some trans people may pursue to affirm their gender identity. These activities may include changes to their name, sex designation, dress, the use of specific pronouns, and possibly medically supportive treatments, such as hormone therapy, sex-reassignment surgery, or other procedures. There is no checklist or average time for a transition process and no universal goal or endpoint. Instead, each person decides what meets their needs.

The terms male and female, man/boy, and woman/girl are not interchangeable. To be male or female originates from physical characteristics derived from sex chromosomes and genes that lead to certain gonads, internal and external genitalia, and physiological hormones. Being a man or a woman holds broader meaning within sociocultural concepts of masculinity and femininity. As language will undoubtedly continue to evolve, it will be essential to re-visit and reaffirm the continued relevance of these definitions for use in a Canadian context, particularly as culturally appropriate definitions continue to emerge. Understanding and using key terminology appropriately is the first step in creating safe spaces for TGNC athletes.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite a rich history of research examining various issues associated with participation in youth sport, its policies, programs, and practices are rarely informed by research evidence. Studies have shown that coaches' lack of awareness and time are barriers to using research evidence. Instead, coaches tend to obtain new ideas from other coaches or coaching clinics and seminars rather than sports scientists and published research. Representatives from national sport organizations perceive a general disconnect between research and practice, and a lack of organizational capacity restricts their ability to use research evidence to inform policy decisions (Holt et al., 2018).

Since this study focuses on the youth sports policy and gender, emphasis was placed on several aspects of literature that look at how gender is identified and constructed in children and how that relates to the development of sport policies. First, who establishes the child's gender, and how is it reinforced? Secondly, how gender identity affects youth participation and how youth sports organizations have laid the framework for the policies that dictate participation in a gender binary sport. Moreover, how does a youth sport organization deal with the realities of families with TGNC athletes?

2.1 GENDER MESSAGING IN CHILDHOOD

One of the first questions asked of a new parent by well-wishing friends and family is, "Is it a boy or a girl?". Little girls are swaddled in pink blankets in the hospital and little boys in blue. New moms receive bouquets of pink or blue flowers, and the babies receive the cutest teddy bears – appropriately colour-coded, of course. Baby boys

are described as “big” and “strong.” Parents are “proud to announce” the arrival of their “little man.” Baby girls are described as “beautiful” and “delicate.” Parents are “happy to announce” the arrival of their “little princess.” A growing body of research is focused on gender socializing in-utero and in infancy (Harpel & Hertzog, 2010; Sandelowski, 1994). As Barnes states, “there are good theoretical reasons to assume that finding out the sex may change how the expectant mothers think and interact with the fetus” (Barnes, 2015, p. 190). In 2003, Iris Young wrote of her 1983 essay titled *Pregnant Embodiment*

“... sonogram technology has altered the experience of the pregnant women and their partners in significant ways. It is now routine for obstetricians to order one or more sonogram images after the fetus is large enough to distinguish features through its use. The sonogram projects an image of the developing fetus. Pregnant women, their partners and others who view the image often speak of the thrill of first seeing it. I have met more than one proud father who carries around a print of the image of a two-month-old fetus to show to his friends and colleagues.” (Young & NetLibrary, 2005, pp. 60-61)

Does sex, determined by prenatal ultrasound, influence how the expectant parents interact with their unborn baby? Further, why do some expectant parents choose not to know the sex?

In 2005, researcher Kara Smith chronicled her “discussions” with her second child during her pregnancy. At the end of the second trimester, an ultrasound revealed she was carrying a boy.

He was a boy. He was “stronger” now than the child I had known only one minute before... He did not need to be coddled. Thus, I lowered my voice to a deeper octave. It lost its tenderness... I wanted him to be “strong and athletic”; therefore, I had to speak to him with a stereotypical “strong,” “masculine” voice to encourage this “innate strength.” (Smith, 2005, p. 51).

As an educational researcher, Smith was shocked at her findings. She writes, “If a woman as conscious as I about engendered language, labels and socializes a baby in utero, according to gender, what [gender]-stereotyped signals would an average mother

send her baby?” (Smith, 2005, p. 52). As much as we want to believe we are raising our children without any pre-conception of gender, our implicit associations are not always in sync with our conscious minds. We have the best intentions, but our behaviours are influenced without awareness and sometimes despite it. As Smith stated, “... mothers do not escape this endemic, gender socializing process, and are bound through generations of indoctrination, to pass it on, what hope do we have as a society to escape such heavily engulfed stereotypes?”(Smith, 2005, p. 52)

Scholars of gender and childhood also focus on peers' role in gendering children, recognizing that children are not merely passive sponges of parental influence (Bennett & Sani, 2008; Hilliard & Liben, 2010; Messner, 2000). Children themselves become active participants in this gendering process by the time they are conscious of the social relevance of gender, typically before the age of two (Kane, 2006). Ask any parent if they believe their sons and daughters have equal opportunities and are entitled to the same things – and the answer is a resounding yes. Nevertheless, this is not reflected in society’s political, social, economic, and personal power distribution across the gender spectrum. A child enters society’s power distribution via their assigned-at-birth sex and all the labels that go with it. As the author and researcher Travers describes it, “... the systems of power and privilege, ... have a significant impact on our life chances and choices. Our lived experiences shape our biographies in specific geopolitical and historical moments. Context is not everything, but it certainly counts for a lot.” (Travers, 2018, p. 1).

2.2 GENDER IDENTIFICATION

The gender binary system influences what many people consider “normal” or acceptable behaviours, dress, appearances, and roles for women and men. Gender norms

are a dominant force in everyday lives. For example, strength, action, and dominance are seen as masculine traits, while vulnerability, passivity, and receptiveness are stereotypically seen as feminine traits. A woman expressing masculine traits may be labelled overly aggressive, while a man conveying feminine attributes may be labelled weak. When gender-normative expectations, based on assigned-at-birth sex, are not met through a person's mannerisms and comportment, behaviours, and appearance, society labels them as gender variant or gender non-conforming. Gender norms can contribute to power imbalances and gender inequality at home, at work, and in communities (Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, 2020).

Transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) youth encompass the broader range of individuals who will benefit from gender-inclusive efforts (Gillard, Buzuvis, & Bialeschki, 2014). For example, TGNC youth would also include an individual who identifies as female and whose assigned sex is female but whose appearance, expression, and activity preferences sometimes defy gender expectations. For transgender individuals, gender nonconformity is deeply rooted in their gender identity, that internal sense of gender, whether male, female or something not captured by either of these binary categories.

All of us have a gender identity, but for TGNC individuals, gender identity defies the sex category to which they were assigned at birth. Some transgender individuals experience their gender identity to match instead the "opposite" sex category, such as an individual born male but who comes to realize an internal sense of being female. At some point in life, this individual might transition—whether socially, surgically, medically, or combined—to synchronize the gender identity with appearance and expression. Other

transgender individuals have gender identities that they cannot accurately describe as male or female and present a non-binary gender presentation (Gillard et al., 2014).

Most people develop their gender identity at an early age. For transgender youth, the emerging awareness that one's internal sense of gender does not match their body can be scary, confusing, and stressful. Society often reacts negatively to gender nonconforming behaviour, and transgender individuals can, as a result, deny their gender identities or suppress gender-nonconforming expression due to fear of rejection, isolation, harassment, or even violence. Those youth who do come out as transgender experience many of those things, as evidenced by research findings documenting verbal and physical harassment and abuse of transgender youth by their family members (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006), their classmates, and teachers. Transgender youth also must devote considerable mental energy to navigating challenging social contexts. These factors contribute to the unique vulnerability of TGNC youth as a population, which is marked by high rates of suicide and other life-threatening behaviours, truancy and absenteeism from school, lower academic achievement, homelessness, and different dangerous situations (Gillard et al., 2014). In the face of adversity, resilience is a dynamic, evolving process. When experiencing an adverse event, some choose to give up and surrender their goal, yet others experience a steeling effect that reduces vulnerabilities (Grace & Wells, 2015).

Many leading practitioners working with TGNC youth and their families agree on several critical points—first, and perhaps most important - that TGNC children *exist*. As fundamental as this premise may seem, it marks a significant milestone (Minter, 2012). As recently as the 1970s and even early 1980s, many mental health professionals would

have considered a child who insisted that he or she was “really” the other gender to be psychotic or, at the least, deeply disturbed. The treatments meted out to those children were often damaging and cruel, albeit motivated by a sincere belief that the child’s gender variance could be “corrected” and benefit the child (Minter, 2012, p. 426).

On January 7, 2022, Bill C-4, a federal bill that amends Canada’s Criminal Code by creating new criminal offences related to conversion therapy, came into effect. The new offences include knowingly causing another person to undergo conversion therapy, promoting or advertising conversion therapy, and receiving financial or material benefits from conversion therapy. Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada David Lametti and Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth Marci Ien introduced the bill on November 29, 2021. On December 1, Members of Parliament (MPs) in the House of Commons unanimously agreed to adopt a motion to pass the bill expeditiously. Soon after, the bill was also fast-tracked in the Senate, and on December 7, it was passed without amendment. The bill received royal assent on December 8, 2021. The bill stipulated that the law would come into force 30 days after receiving royal assent.¹

2.3 SPORT PARTICIPATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

Today sports organizations typically offer separate teams for boys and girls, presumably premised on the widely accepted social belief that girls and boys, like women and men, have categorically unequal sports capabilities. However, the increasing number

¹ (2022) *Canada: Bill C-4 Banning Conversion Therapy Comes into Force*. [Web Page] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2022-01-19/canada-bill-c-4-banning-conversion-therapy-comes-into-force/>.

of youth athletes openly identifying as transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) - and expressing their gender nonconformity at younger ages - has complicated this sex-segregated approach. Sport management can play a significant role in fulfilling trans persons' right to participate in sports activities and social life. Physical activity and its spaces, facilities, and practices are among the few realms in social life where sex segregation is (uncritically) admitted, demanded, and eventually monitored. In this scenario, organizations need to be aware that access and participation in physical activity and sport are intrinsically problematic for trans persons as they have a complicated or impossible match within sex/gender binarism. Though the pressure and effects of the binary sex segregation system are often implicit, they shape the kind and quality of trans persons' experiences in sport (Pérez-Samaniego, Fuentes-Miguel, Pereira-García, López-Cañada, & Devís-Devís, 2019).

In their scoping review of work published from 1969 to October 2020, Shaw et al. (Shaw & Cunningham, 2021) found 260 published journal articles that looked at the management, marketing and governance of sport within LGBTQ2S+ people's experiences. Eight authors account for more than 20% of the articles. Referenced in their review was Buzuvis's work on the governance of sport as it relates to the LGBTQ2S+ community. She states that sport organizations should endorse gender-identity-based participation, which is effective at the youth and non-elite sports levels. Buzuvis concluded that "The manner in which law constrains or supports inclusion is a complex and dynamic issue that scholars should continue to follow closely going forward, with an eye towards helping sport organizations develop policies consistent with law and maximizing inclusion."

Over the last two decades, Sport Canada, the Canadian Women and Sport, and the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES) have worked together on several national policy initiatives directed at making sports more inclusive and welcoming. The joint report in 2012 likened sport to a societal mirror and magnifying glass. It recognized the following statements:

Sport is in transition because more and more transgender and intersex athletes at all levels are at risk of falling into the still-often-hostile uncertainty brought about by medical tests or from obsolete attitudes and structures in sport's governance.

Sport is in transition because medical verification of sex, or "gender testing," has proven to be intrusive and inaccurate and premised on the still-lingering Cold War suspicions that presume athletes with variations of sex development are motivated by cheating and must be policed.

Sport is in transition because the need to welcome and protect transgender or intersex athletes is increasingly urgent that because sex is naturally complicated and can no longer wait in the hope for a scientifically perfect and uncontroversial solution to sex determination.

Sport is in transition because many of its bodies and regulators are already trying or anxious to reform policies for inclusion, mainly to fulfill their duty of care towards transgender and intersex athletes while maintaining the level playing field (or fairness) that is essential for sport's legitimacy and integrity.

And sport is in transition because society is in transition as well, as we encounter sex and gender barriers in other spheres of culture, entertainment, or competition, and develop the public awareness and resources for reinforcing fairness in all our institutions and activities. (Daw, 2012, p. 4).

However, as Teetzel and Weaving (Teetzel & Weaving, 2017) caution, organizations seeking to develop trans sport policy would benefit from contextualization derived from the fields of sociology, philosophy, law, psychology, law, psychology, gender studies, political science and the biological sciences. The pursuit of excellence is not the exclusive domain of the cisgender athlete - we all want to 'Bend it Like Beckham' in our own uniquely different way. Moreover, for the TGNC youth, their transition

process is a journey. Each trans person will make other choices about: how they choose to live their true gender; how they present their gender socially; to whom they disclose personal information; and whether they undertake hormonal or surgical transitions at various points in their life. Sports organizations can support individuals' participation in sports as they navigate their journey around gender identity (Daw, 2012).

The physiological, social, and psychological benefits of sport, especially team sports, are well documented for children and adults. In conjunction with all levels of governmental Sports Ministers and National, Provincial, and Territorial Sport Organizations, Sport Canada adopted the Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD) model in 2005 (Beaudoin, Callary, & Trudeau, 2015). One of its objectives is to foster a life-long commitment to physical activity and sports participation, beginning in childhood. The model acknowledges parents, community programs, schools, and daycares as primary support systems for these young athletes. However, as they grow, the rates of teenage sports team dropouts are a stumbling block to the program's overall goal.

Research (Doull, Watson, Smith, Homma, & Saewyc, 2018) has also shown that participation in team sports has benefits above and beyond those seen with physical activity because of sports' social nature and the resultant benefits for self-esteem and social interaction. For example, in a systematic review of studies that examined the benefits of sports participation for young people, active participants saw improvements in self-esteem, social skills, confidence, and competence. In addition, they reported fewer depressive symptoms than non-participants.

However, Doull et al.'s study results also reveal that significant disparities in sports and physical activity participation between heterosexual and sexual minority youth are persistent and widening. In addition, a growing body of evidence describes the distinct challenges for sexual minority youth participating in formal vs. informal sports. In this context, regular sports participation is measured as participation on coached teams and described as unwelcoming for sexual minority teens, particularly gay males. It contrasts with narrowing the gaps in disparities in informal sports participation without a coach, highlighting that coached sports may still represent a particularly unwelcome environment for sexual minority teens (Doull et al., 2018).

In their article, Jayne Caudwell discusses society's assumption of a "stable binary gender system," through which all people, including transgender people, can be classified (Caudwell, 2012, p. 406). However, a transgender person does not always fit the traditional binary systems, which uphold gender norms and existing dominant sports cultures. Most current sport policies fail to recognize the diversity and fluidity of gender and sexuality. Instead, they are medicalized and invariably demand a fixed embodied transition from one sex or gender to the opposite. Since sport depends on such definitive oppositional categories, sports participation is particularly difficult for trans and gender non-conforming people. The difficulties are not static and straightforward but change according to social and cultural contexts (Caudwell, 2014).

In the face of elevated stress, adversity, and risk factors for TGNC youth, developmental programming should focus on providing support and opportunities for youth to transition to fully functioning adulthood rather than preventing harmful behaviours. Developing skills such as striving for balance, learning to cope, questioning,

and eventually becoming comfortable with one's gender identity, expression, and sexual orientation all require resiliency, even for youth who are not transgender or gender nonconforming. Extensive research has addressed the need to develop inclusive policies for TGNC youth in team sports (Davis, 2017; Travers, 2018). However, research is scarce regarding the implementation or consequences of such policies on youth sports organizations. This study consequently addresses this gap in the research literature, albeit on a small scale. This gap does not necessarily mean that sports organizations are not interested in establishing inclusive procedures; instead, there is little to no guidance or experience from which the leaders can draw.

To create genuinely inclusive sporting environments, it is essential to realize that if an individual does not fit our ingrained assumptions about sex and gender, it is up to sport to adapt, not the individual. As a society and a sporting community, we now have ample experience, evidence, and understanding to recognize that the experiences of trans individuals are real and represent an essential element of our broader human diversity. With this knowledge, we need to be careful not to place the responsibility on trans individuals to adapt to a system that was not designed with them in mind. Instead, as the people who make and shape the youth sports systems in Canada, we should look at our policies and processes to find ways to acknowledge the lived experience of all youth athletes. When we look at what changes are needed in sport—profound though some may seem—all are certainly within the realm of possibility for each sports club or organization in Canada (Ainsworth, 2016).

CHAPTER 3: ALIGNMENT OF WORLD SOCCER GOVERNING BODIES

Most sports organizations work within a hierarchal framework, from the recreational to the professional and international levels. The highest level within the sporting body establishes most governance policies and procedures, with each consecutive level adding specific requirements unique to their situation. Sports families are most familiar with the soccer clubs and organizations resident in their communities. These local clubs are typical of the club that is the subject of this case study. However, for this paper's purpose, it is helpful to conceptualize how the average Calgary-based soccer club fits into the world of soccer.

Figure 1- *FIFA Continental Governing Bodies*



For soccer, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association or FIFA is a non-profit organization recognized as the international federation governing body of football (known as soccer in North America). FIFA's membership comprises 211 national associations and six continental governing bodies representing different world regions. Canada is one of the 41 members of CONCACAF (continental governing body), the Confederation of North and Central American and Caribbean Association Football.

As the national sport organization, Canada Soccer is responsible for governing and promoting soccer in Canada. In partnership with its members, Canada Soccer fosters the growth and development of soccer in Canada, from grassroots to high performance and on a national scale. Soccer is the largest participatory sport in Canada and is considered the fastest-growing sport. There are nearly 1,000,000 registered Canada Soccer active participants in Canada within 1,200 clubs that operate in 13 provincial/territorial member associations. Canada Soccer is affiliated with the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), The Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football (Concacaf), and the Canadian Olympic Committee (from canadasoccer.com).

The Alberta Soccer Association or ASA is an association member of Canada Soccer and is the governing body for soccer in Alberta. Its twenty-two members represent the district organizations throughout the province. In Alberta, soccer was perhaps the first team sport to be played. John McDougall made the earliest reference to the game of soccer in Alberta in 1862. At that time, that part of the Hudson's Bay Company territory that is now a part of Alberta was settled by native Indians and white settlers, who were primarily of English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish descent, in whose countries association football was already a popular sport. According to Macdougall, on a frigid December day in 1862 at Fort Edmonton, "the fun was fast and furious." To the south, recorded soccer games began in Calgary in 1883 between members of the North-West Mounted Police and citizens of the town. ²

² <https://albertasoccer.com/about/history/>

The Calgary Minor Soccer Association, or CMSA, is a district member of the Alberta Soccer Association. It represents 37 member clubs and is the largest sports organization in Calgary that provides a year-round activity for youth. Each year, over 1,600 youth teams and approximately 20,000 players participate in CMSA programs supported by over 3,000 community volunteers. I sit as the vice-president on the CMSA board of directors.

The McKenzie United Soccer Club (MUSC) is a non-profit youth soccer club based in southeast Calgary, Alberta, Canada. It represents 2000 youth players, with approximately half under ten years of age and 100 adult players and is a CMSA member. As MUSC's general manager, I am responsible for the club's day-to-day operations and the policies and procedures that support the day-to-day operations. I am also a coach, a coach mentor, and a player.

3.1 NATIONAL YOUTH SOCCER PLAYER DATABASE

Player profiles are established by the first club with which the youth player registers. Profiles contain, among other personal information, the player's gender. In the Province of Alberta, player profiles are shared with Canada Soccer as part of each player's permanent record. Since, at the time of this study, the Provincial and Territorial Sports Organizations (PTSOs) had not addressed TGNC player inclusivity in any meaningful way, those clubs' responsibility was to manage player profiles for TGNC youth athletes.

Most youth players compete at the recreational and developmental stages, and only a tiny minority participate at the elite high-performance stage. Moreover, current

rules of play for registration and eligibility for these elite youth athletes are based explicitly on sex-assigned-at-birth. In other words, there is a need for governance, regulation, and policy changes to address gender inclusivity at the recreational and developmental stages of play.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH QUESTION

In the spring of 2018, two families with TGNC children contacted MUSC regarding their children's eligibility for the outdoor season. The children wanted to continue playing soccer, but the parents were uncertain about the registration process. I reached out to our district association for guidance but found a gap in their policies and registration procedures. One of the pillars of my role as the club's general manager is the support of all youth players, and in particular, the players in MUSC. To that end, and given the lack of support from the governing bodies, I rewrote MUSC's player registration policy to enable parents and guardians to select the gendered league of play based on their child's gender identity. In addition, the club decided to modify the online registration form in real-time rather than publicly announce the change to the membership. The new process was applied to all youth players between 3 and 17 years of age and came into effect in September 2019.

Over the years since the club adopted its gender-identity-based registration, I have had many anecdotal conversations about "how and why" the club implemented gender-inclusive registration. A few, not in sports leadership, questioned the policy change's necessity "since it would not affect many players" or that "a rule like this isn't really necessary." Both these comments surprised me since personal friends echoed them. Conversely, those in youth sports leadership with whom I spoke, whether coaches, administrators or volunteers, unanimously agreed that the change would benefit youth soccer. Also, organizations from various sports, including basketball and water polo, companies that support online registration programs (PowerUp Sports), and Canada Soccer, have all expressed keen interest in this project.

From a personal perspective, the marginalization of the TGNC players resonates with my experiences as an engineer. In school and on the job harassment and verbal abuse were daily occurrences. These were so normal, that I did not recognize that it was wrong. I thought that in order to be part of the team or “one of the boys,” I had to endure. It wasn’t until things escalated that I questioned their motivation and my tolerance.

My experiences and impressions from these conversations and events motivate the following two research questions used in this study.

Research Question 1: How are some youth soccer organizations in Canada interpreting or pursuing the development of gender-inclusive youth player policies?

Research Question 2: What are the effects, if any, of a gender-inclusive policy on club operations as experienced by coaches and administrators?

Increasingly, youth clubs are looking at governance policies and how they impact players, especially at younger ages. If we are to grow youth sports, and soccer in particular, by making the game more inclusive, answers to these questions are crucial to organizational strategic planning and long-term player development.

As society continues to grapple with the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and its variants, the interruption of youth sport allowed sport policymakers to reset and redefine what sports can be for our youth. We can remind both adults and youth athletes that sports have benefits other than in the win-loss columns. The socio-economic changes that continue to evolve from the public health orders for isolation, and restrictions on businesses, gatherings, and travel, will have a far-reaching influence on sports that will take many years to be fully realized. Children have adapted to a new way

of learning in isolation, relating with their peers in isolation, and developing social skills in isolation. And then (for most), suddenly, they had to re-learn all their social skills. For many youth athletes, their “sports village” represented a safe place to play and interact with friends before the pandemic – and it can be again. By adopting new (or amending existing) policies, sports governing bodies can embrace a leadership role that prioritizes youth players' physical and psychological health.

CHAPTER 5: METHODOLOGY

A case study approach was used to examine the effects, if any, of the September 2019 change in MUSC's player registration process with the club's staff. All research participants were asked about their own experiences in the context of coaching TGNC athletes and about their own organization's initiatives (if any) towards inclusive registration policies. The effects of these policies could take various forms, such as increases or decreases in player registrations, complaints, or praise to the team, club, or district officials, or potentially harassment of the player and their families.

“Good research is not about good methods as much as it is about good thinking”
-Robert Stake, *The Art of Case Study Research*

In his book *The Art of Case Study Research* (Stake, 1995), Stake describes four qualitative case studies' defining characteristics. The research must be:

1. Holistic (contextualized and bounded),
2. Empirical (field-oriented and naturalistic),
3. Interpretive (researcher interacts with the subject), and
4. Empathic (subject's perspective and frame of reference).

The case study is a research strategy that focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings. The case study design uses naturally occurring knowledge in the physical space by pulling together holistic, naturalistic, ethnographic, and phenomenological methods (Hyett, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2014).

Much thinking, reasoning, speculating, and anticipating was done before and since changing the MUSC's player registration process. To study the effects of the policy change, the questions of "how" and "why" and the necessity of considering the context of the phenomenon were considered. Gender inclusivity, eligibility of TGNC athletes, and the governance policies that reinforce the processes are new to most organizations. Therefore, the adaptability of the case study approach presented the best fit for the analysis and interpretation of the situation.

To Stake's four points above, this case study is:

1. Holistic – the study looks at the effects of the current policy and the plans for policy development within youth soccer.
2. Empirical – the interviewees are all involved directly with youth athletes and decision-making for their respective organizations.
3. Interpretive – the interviewees and I are from the collective of youth sports organizers and decision-makers. I have held a similar organizational position as each interviewee at some point in my career. Through my experiences, I understood the broader contextual meanings of their responses.
4. Empathic – I was able to relate to all the interviewees. I am a coach, a policy and decision-maker, and an athlete. So, I was able to put myself "in their cleats."

The research must also be able to withstand scrutiny. As Patton and Appelbaum (Patton & Appelbaum, 2003) suggest, social sciences, in general, and case studies, in particular, have a reputation for being soft and subjective and neither generalizable nor objective. The most significant criticism of the case study is that it is subjective and strongly influenced by the researcher – which is true. All research depends on interpretation, but quantitative research tries to remove the researcher’s subjectivity through design and analysis. In comparison, the qualitative study relies on the subjective judgment and analysis of the researcher. The researcher must have in-situ knowledge and pre-understanding of the phenomenon but still be open to new experiences and understandings. Therefore, the researcher becomes a variable that will influence the study (Patton & Appelbaum, 2003). Critical reflection can acknowledge that results may be affected by the researcher’s position within the phenomenon’s context.

MUSC is the first youth soccer club in the province of Alberta to implement a gender identity-based player registration process. However, in my research, I discovered it was not the first in Canada. The questions concerning membership reaction, impact on the financial bottom line, player effects (whether actual or expected), and more are those that I hope to explore with this research.

5.1 SAMPLING AND PARTICIPANTS

I intended to focus this research on the parental and player (through the parent) reactions to the change in the club’s registration policy. I wanted to explore the acceptance levels of the inclusive policy from varying perspectives – the coach, the player (through parent), the parent, the club, and governing body. At the outset of this

research study, my goal was to interview a range of club parents, volunteers, coaches, and technical staff for 8 to 16 interviews.

However, the COVID pandemic forced all youth sports to shut down for more than fifteen months. The government banned all on-field training, matches, and group fitness sessions. Without the original pool of subjects from which to choose interview candidates, I refocused my research towards the reactions and previous experiences (if any) of senior technical staff, administrators, and organizers of youth soccer clubs to TGNC players and gender identity-based play. Another critical point of inquiry was the existence or potential existence of inclusive policies at organizations other than MUSC. Have other youth sport organizations faced similar situations like MUSC, where a TGNC youth wants to join based on their gender identity?

Consequently, the sample group was formed from six senior technical staff and volunteers from within the club and five senior staff members from our National Sports Organization – Canada Soccer, the Provincial Sports Organization – Alberta Soccer, and other youth soccer clubs outside of Alberta, and industry. All interviewees are on-field trainers or coaches and administrators with their respective organizations. No compensation to recruits was offered.

5.2 RECRUITMENT

(Please refer to Appendices A-1 to 3 and B1 and B2)

As mentioned above, due to the COVID-induced shutdowns of youth sports, the recruiting of candidates had to be altered. One of the (very) few positive outcomes of the COVID shutdowns was the increased number of webinars and online forums related to

inclusivity. Some were international, some national, and some local, but all provided a platform for discussion of topics in youth sports. In addition, meeting hosts shared attendee lists, and I contacted club executive directors from other provinces for some external interviews. Internally, the club's Grassroots Coaching staff and volunteer Grassroots coordinators were invited to participate. I also reached out to the provincial and national soccer organizations, both of whom were eager to participate. Overall, eleven interviews were conducted. The group of eleven had the following perspectives:

- Eight coaches – they are currently coaching youth sports
- Seven administrators – they are in a senior management role within their organization
- Six senior technical trainers – they are on-field with the youth athletes
- Six MUSC members – their children play with the club, or the club employs them
- Six policymakers – they are directly responsible for policy creation and implementation for their youth sport organization
- Six parents of youth soccer players
- Four provinces represented: Alberta, Ontario, Saskatchewan and New Brunswick
- Two countries represented: Canada and England

At the beginning of the interview, participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. As well, the written consent form contained a withdrawal option. If the participant agreed to continue with the interview, their information was used for the study. If the participant chose to withdraw, the interview would have been stopped. The participant had the option of having their information and all related recordings, notes, and emails, deleted from the research study. Otherwise, their data - up to that point -

would be used in the research. My contact information was available in the consent agreement, should participants wish to obtain feedback on the findings and a copy of the report. No candidate asked to withdraw.

5.3 PROCEDURE

Approval from the University of Lethbridge's Ethical Review of Human Research Committee was obtained before the COVID shutdown of youth sports. Since the only change in the study was a refocusing of the interview pool of candidates (that had already been approved). A second approval was not sought for this study.

The mode of the semi-structured interviews (~30 min) was at the discretion of the interviewee – an online platform or over the phone. The meetings were audio-recorded (with permission) and transcribed, and notes were taken. I entered the interviewee's verbal answers for the general information form: name, contact information, the preferred method of contact, etc., into the master spreadsheet.

There was an interview guide (see Appendices D, E, F, & G), but the questions were open-ended. If the participant wished to discuss something off-topic, occasionally, I pursued the avenue of conversation. The interview questions focused on the participant's feelings, beliefs, and convictions about their lived experiences as coaches, administrators, volunteers, or youth soccer parents.

The interpretive or social constructivist approach supports a transactional method of inquiry, where the researcher has a personal interaction with the case (Hyett et al., 2014). This research asked participants to reflect and discuss their own and, if applicable, their child's soccer-based experiences. They were also asked about their organization's gender-inclusive policy; whether it existed or was in development in their organization.

Participants were advised ahead of the interview of the nature of the topic and that their experiences would be discussed.

Memoing was used in this study. Memos are not just descriptive summaries of data but attempt to synthesize them into higher-level analytic meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is easy for researchers to become so absorbed in the data-collection process that they fail to reflect on what is happening. Thus, the researcher must balance descriptive notes and reflective notes. The interviewees were not given the questions ahead of the interview, and it resulted in some off-topic responses, where they would begin to answer the question but latch onto something they felt was relevant. I used the notes taken during the interview and my immediately-following-the-interview notes to fully capture the nuances of their responses and assign pseudonyms. Some answers truly surprised me, such as when Jordan stated

“... I like the idea that we talked about earlier – using pronoun identifiers. I was like all pretty Pollyanna accepting about it. But I said I’m not going to start meetings like that because people will think I’m doing it because I’m gay. That’s why I didn’t do it.” (Jordan)

They continued to express their fear of standing up and standing alone on TGNC policy development.

AM: At what point does gender-identity-based registration become an accepted practice for youth soccer?

“It’s got to be across the board. Everyone has to do it, not just one or two clubs. But the point in time that we have a male that identifies as female, we can’t put them on a female team if they were born a male. We can’t.” (Jordan)

Theirs were the only can’t-go-it-alone-styled responses, which falls in with the higher-than-average level of difficulty I experienced in setting a date for this interview.

5.4 POTENTIAL RISKS AND BENEFITS

As noted above, this research asked participants to reflect and discuss their soccer-based experiences regarding TGNC youth players and their organizations' inclusivity policies (if applicable). Therefore, if a participant had difficulty answering any questions, I would have paused the interview and asked them if they would like to take a break, skip the question, or reconvene later. Moreover, I always considered the participants' feelings, thoughts, emotions, and well-being in this study.

Given my General Manager's position in the soccer club, some would perceive the presence of a power imbalance. However, the club's governance structure strictly divides the technical and operational sides. I do not influence player or coach assignments or retain the soccer club's technical staff. Those fall under the purview of the club's Technical Director and the board of directors. All participants knew my position with the club, which I believe increased the participants' comfort, confidence, and honesty during the interviews. Voluntary participation in the study was a key message to all recruits.

Before publication or dissemination of findings, if a participant was quoted directly, they were emailed to verify the contextual integrity and ensure no errors in their statement(s). Besides my thesis committee and school of study, should the soccer club, the district, or the provincial soccer association request a copy of my findings, I will provide a lay summary. Further, as part of the consent form, participants were given my contact information should they wish feedback or a copy of the results.

5.5 OBTAINING CONSENT

(Please refer to Appendix C – Letter of Consent)

The order of communication and consent for all participants is listed below. All correspondences are saved on my laptop and the external hard drive.

- Recruitment email (Appendix A-1): This Email was sent to volunteer age group coordinators.
- Recruitment email (Appendix A-2): This Email was sent to technical staff (MUSC)
- Recruitment email (Appendix A-3): This Email was sent to senior technical directors and administrators at member clubs within the district and to the ASA (provincial body) Grassroots director.
- Agreement email (Appendix B-1): This Email was sent to coaches who agreed to the interview.
- Agreement email (Appendix B-2): This Email was sent to the senior technical director and administrators, who agreed to the interview.
- Consent email (Appendix C): This was attached to the agreement email sent to all participants.

CHAPTER 6 FINDINGS

A case study is an empirical inquiry investigating a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundary between the object of study and context is unclear. It copes with the technically distinctive situation in which there will be many more variables of interest than data points and, as one result, relies on multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to coverage in a triangulating fashion, and as another result, benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis.

--(Ebneyamini & Sadeghi Moghadam, 2018) *Toward Developing a Framework for Conducting Case Study Research*

Ebneyamini and Sadeghi Moghadam (2018) argue that the best any researcher can do is follow a set of guidelines developed by experts in the field that attempt *to be true to the phenomenon*. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, gender inclusivity in sports has been scrutinized for several years. If the world governing athletic organizations cannot build an inclusive policy for their TGNC athletes, how are the youth organizations handling their own situations? How relatable are youth clubs' experiences to what is occurring on the world stage?

As a social construct, sport is often noted as a microcosm of the larger society. In Canada, Amateur sport, community sports for children and youth represents one of the more significant segments, has become an entrepreneurial zone for politicians, bureaucrats, sport advocates, and corporate and media groups. In tandem with a new class of sport professionals, they are busily engaged in spinning a cornucopia of claims concerning the benefits of sport that come close to transfiguring it into a modern-day equivalent of the mythical "horn of plenty," a mysterious mechanism that provides whatever might be desired. Unobtrusively attached to these claims is the provision that these new agencies, partnerships, and sport professionals ought to be empowered and

funded to oversee and direct what has only relatively recently been “rebranded” as an overarching “sport delivery system” (Dyck, 2012).

The average amateur sport organization is run primarily by volunteers, who are almost exclusively the players' registration-fee-paying parents. These volunteers form the club's organizing committee or Board of Directors. Occasionally some volunteers will join for the wrong reasons and with their agenda, but most innocently join the board simply to help. The fiduciary duty of the organization's volunteer Board of Directors is to be responsible for the overall welfare of the club. They must make policy decisions and take actions that are always in the club's best interest, notwithstanding the complex stakeholder groups that are often at odds. They are expected to balance all parental concerns about their child's participation and athletic success with even-handed treatment of other children and youth members of the team or club. Altruism is implicitly and sometimes explicitly demanded, if not always reciprocated by parents who call for it from coaches and club officials. All of this occurs within structured competitive sports events designed to create and delineate winners and losers, outcomes capable of fueling highly combustible and sometimes combative emotions among both athletes and spectators. To understand why youth sports operate the way they do, we need to keep in mind the possibility that officials' claims about the nature of parents, children, and organized sports activities might tell us less about the actual attributes of the parent, children, and sports, than about what these are “supposed” to be (Dyck, 2012).

6.1 SELF-REFLECTION

In the description of case study research earlier in this paper, I touched on the importance of the researcher's knowledge and pre-understanding of the phenomenon described by Stake (1995) and Patton and Appelbaum (2003). The degree to which the researcher is familiar with the phenomenon's context, social patterns, and communication affects objectivity and validity. As Stake puts it, "The case researcher plays different roles and has options for how they will be played. The roles may include teacher, participant, observer, interviewer, reader, storyteller, advocate, artist, counsellor, evaluator, consultant ... Each researcher consciously or unconsciously makes continuous decisions about how much emphasis to give each role." (Stake, 1995, p. 91).

I have spent more than 20 years in this career that I did not know I wanted. One of the key concepts that I have come to appreciate is individuality. Every player is unique, and every family is different. To be effective and diligent in my role, empathy and patience are as essential as governance and fiscal responsibility. Youth soccer players just want to play with whomever and wherever they can. The policies and regulations imposed by adults restrict and deny these opportunities.

But as Richardson discusses in their article on qualitative research writing, objectivity and validity in postmodernist writing are not two dimensional – right or wrong – yes or no – black or white. Validity has become multi-faceted "... a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic." (Richardson, 2000, pp. 13-14). They point out that self-reflection brings to the fore the complex, personal, ideological, and social notions that seep into our writing.

In April of 2020, I was interviewed by one of my former players for his undergraduate course on Ethics in Engineering. We Zoomed a couple of times, caught up on his life, and discussed what it was like being a female engineering student and eventually working in my chosen field. I loved the practice of engineering. Its creativity, originality, and strength appealed to me – and I knew I could do it. But my enthusiasm and enjoyment for the craft were crushed under the feet of marginalization, discrimination, ignorance, prejudice, and violence. The similarities between the experiences of TGNC youth athletes and my own lived experiences are apparent. These similarities provided the basis for my motivation to research this topic. Jake labelled me a pioneer and a trailblazer in his final report, and I am okay with that.

6.2 ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

6.2.1 BRACKETING AND REDUCTION

The researcher attempts to be as empathic, interpretive, empirical and holistic as possible by suspending their personal beliefs, metaphorically bracketing, or corralling their internal lenses and value filters. A good check is for the researcher to list their presuppositions of which they are aware.

I know I am inclined to see little to no acceptance of the TGNC athlete in this research, so I have been mindful of that bias. I am also not immune to society's "gendering" of sports – football, baseball, and basketball as "male" and gymnastics, figure skating, and cheerleading as "female." Oddly enough, I "see" skiing, snowboarding, and running as asexual.

6.2.2 DELINEATING UNITS OF MEANING

Delineating units of meaning is a critical phase of explicating the data, in that those statements that are seen to illuminate the researched phenomenon are extracted or ‘isolated’ (Hycner, 1985). The researcher must make several judgment calls while consciously bracketing their presuppositions to avoid subjective judgments. To do this, the researcher considers the actual content, the significance, as indicated by the number of times a meaning was mentioned, and nonverbal clues, e.g. how it was stated, to find the “most meaningful” definitions. The actual meaning of two seemingly similar units of meaning might differ in weight or context.

6.3 RESULTS

All the interview subjects wore multiple “hats” within the context of their youth sports organization, and they were able to respond from these varying perspectives. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to interview these incredibly well-rounded persons. Most interviews were 30 minutes to 45 minutes and were rich with each person’s years of experience both on and off the field.

As I was listening to the responses and in reviewing my notes, I began a tally of topics that were most often referred to in the conversations. Table 1 below represents a tally board for the four most popular topics from all the responses. Each value represents the number of times an interviewee mentioned the topic during the interview. If the interviewee mentioned a different topic more than five times during the interview, that topic was listed in the “Other” column. Four general concepts or units were formed based on the interviewees’ responses and my knowledge of the youth soccer industry.

Table 1 – *Concepts and Trends*

Interviewee (Alias)	Org Structure	Parents	Policies	Coach	Other Topic
Rowan	6	8	8	0	
Kennedy	13	9	6	5	Club culture
Jordan	3	3	4	9	
Spencer	6	4	9	3	Social media
Kris	0	9	3	6	Role modelling
Kerry	9	13	7	7	Other sports
Pat	0	4	1	8	Belonging
Alex	8	3	10	6	Club Culture
Sawyer	2	6	4	7	
Haven	8	12	4	2	
Morgan	6	2	8	3	Public perception
Total	61	73	64	56	

The tallies point to the interviewee’s concentration of their experiences – whether mostly on-field, in the stands, or in the office/boardroom. The totals at the bottom give a general indication of the influence of each concept. As expected, most organizations are concerned with parental reactions and behaviors related to changes in organizational policies. Further research into parent reaction to inclusive policy measures would be valuable to youth sports organizations.

- Coach concept – Whether right or wrong, appropriate or not, the coach or team official’s reaction was central to the interviewee’s experience. The coach or team official is pivotal to the situation since they influence, at minimum, the on-field experiences of the players. This concept is part of Theme 1, Inclusivity with Conditions.

- Parent concept – Like the Coach concept, the parent reaction has a further-reaching influence on the youth player. Off the field, in the car and at home, parents play a central role. This concept is part of Theme 1, Inclusivity with Conditions.
- Policy concept – This group addressed the lack of a specific policy within the youth sport organization. This concept is part of Theme 2 Expectations
- Organization concept – This grouped the general governance problems that the organization should have adopted. This concept is part of Theme 2 Expectations
- Notes – Sometimes, an interviewee becomes passionate about a concept other than the main four. It was entered in this column for future research possibilities.

And from the four concepts, two themes become apparent: Theme 1: Inclusivity with conditions and Theme 2: Expectations.

In the interview example below, we discussed team officials' reactions to "differences" in players and the responses these differences prompted.

"I can remember going to a provincial championship, and a team was playing against another team, and there was an African boy who was so much bigger than everyone else. And the coaches came up to me saying he's got to be at least twenty-one. And I said, look, if he's declared that that's his age, who are you to question? Their concern was it wasn't fair. Now, if that same player was six inches smaller, they wouldn't have said anything because they would probably be winning the game. So, I think in sport, some of it is, if it takes away my chance of winning." (Kerry)

In this context, the team officials' reaction is motivated by the difference in the player's appearance on the opposing team and the perceived advantage the older age provides. Despite their knowledge of the policies and procedures governing this competition level, the team officials reacted negatively and inappropriately, all in the

name of fair play. This response was listed to the COACH concept and fell under Theme 1, Inclusivity with Conditions.

In this following concept example, the interviewee illustrated their organization's steps towards being more inclusive. We were discussing an industry process known as BIO-BANDING, which enables players to participate at their stage of development rather than at their chronological age.

“And the only time there's ever been an issue is from a parent's perception of the opposing teams if they feel it has given you a competitive advantage. They charged right up and demanded we do something about it.” (Kennedy)

The context of this scenario is slightly different than the first scenario. The concept PARENT is applied in this case because bio-banding is a long-standing policy of this organization and the league. Although this could have been an organizational issue (parent communication), I interpreted the response as parent-related due to context and the ensuing discussion. This concept also falls under Theme 1, Inclusivity with Conditions.

The Policy concept is seen in the example below. We were discussing the report by the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport – Sport in Transition (Daw, 2012) and its relevance to someone who identifies with the LGBTQ2+ community.

“You know, I can't relate to that. I'm quite happy with who I am and not. But I can accept and understand at a certain level that you need support and what support is it that you need. And that but also recognizing, I think that the person needing the support has some obligation to be able to articulate that as well. I mean, I can sit down and listen to everything else, but you have to tell me. I can't guess.” (Rowan)

The Policy concept forms part of Theme 2 Expectations.

Interviewee Alex and I were discussing parental and spectator behavior regarding TGNC players whose presence is predicted to water down the quality of play. Their answer added to the Organization concept tally and contributed to Theme 2, Expectations.

“I think it’s a huge amount of early education, education from the start. ... if you looked at grassroots [the very young players] there all together, that’s when the education maybe [should] start. ... Start younger trying to encourage parents to be less crazy. On what expectations are and when they can start backing away, and when they could become role models. ... what are the goals of the development of the sport?” (Alex)

6.3.1 THEME 1: INCLUSIVITY WITH CONDITIONS

In 2000, at the inaugural Laureus World Sports Awards, Nelson Mandela declared that: *Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination.*³

With sport’s increasing importance in society, its potential to play a vital role in youth athletes' moral and social education continues to rise. Central to these sporting experiences is the role of the coach. Our youth coaches are charged with the young athletes' physical and technical development and psychological and social well-being. Concepts of fair play, respect, and identity acceptance are endemic at all levels – from grassroots to the national team – and the coach's contribution to social and moral welfare

³ <https://www.globalgoals.org/sport-for-development-and-peace/>

is pivotal. In addition, the coaches' relationships with their athletes; how they bring their lived experiences through knowledge and assumptions to their role as coaches, all of this will influence the team's culture (Norman, 2016).

AM: As a coach, have you ever experienced a player's gender being questioned during or after a match?

"... Probably over the years when a girl has short hair, or a boy has long hair. I think there's some question on that player's gender at the time, and if they're on the current team... I've overheard it and never been approached or had a discussion about it." (Pat)

"... in my experience, I've never had one of my player's [gender] questioned, especially at the younger ages. ... I think it's more, that it's more of a girls' coach problem ..." (Kris)

"Yeah. When {player} was part of the U10 group, and many people thought that he was a girl. ... As more people were commenting on it, I was more focused on it, but it was like you were focusing more on what the physical aspect of his game would be like because of the difference in appearance because he had fair skin and long hair in a ponytail. ... going to get pushed off the ball easily? [But] he was actually a very aggressive player. I don't know if he felt the need to overcompensate for his appearance." (Sawyer)

Against the backdrop of heteronormativity in sport, the coach is the boots-on-the-ground builder of the playing environment for the young athletes. Some gay athletes have reported hearing antigay language spoken by teammates and opponents in a sport setting but did not report finding this particular language homophobic or homonegative due to it being experienced in a sports context (Halbrook, Watson, & Voelker, 2019). In their recent study on youth sport parenting, Eriksen and Stefansen (2021) found that parents see youth sport as an arena for belonging and forming a sense of community for their children. As well, sport offers the players structure and protects against some societal risks (Eriksen & Stefansen, 2021).

“... coaching girls’ teams, you see some girls who have short hair and people will make accusations.... She would wear Doc Martens and stuff like some of the rebellious kids. And I come from that culture. I’m an old punk rocker, and I grew up in that culture. I grew up with the kids and stuff like the boys’ dress, and it never shocked me in sport. ... So, I think a lot of it depends on the coaches, and I make sure that the kids understand where we’re coming from” (Rowan)

The increase, in recent years, of family participation in sport highlights the influence of the parents and legal guardians on the sidelines. While their comments, behaviours, and attitudes influence the player’s attitude and performance, these also contribute significantly to the overall atmosphere at the match through group pressure, cognitive dissonance, and involvement (Sánchez-Romero, Verdaguer, Borràs, & García-Mas, 2020). These non-playing participants expend a significant amount of time, effort, and resources so that their children can be involved in organized youth sport programs. Without parents’ inclination to become involved in community-based youth sport programs, children cannot benefit from participating in sport activities (Kim, Newman, & Kwon, 2020). In the sex-segregated and competitive world of sport (even at the community level), discrimination against TGNC people exists, perhaps with more strength or potency than in other parts of society (Morris & Van Raalte, 2016).

AM: Have you observed or heard about reactions between parents related to other players’ gender identity?

“... oh, yes, [heard gender questioning], but not in a positive way. Is that a girl? Is that person allowed to be playing? Yeah! During a game, and I mean in my books, highly inappropriate to even make the comment in the first place. Mind-boggling. No one responded or engaged the parent. It was shut down immediately.” (Alex)

“... that group of parents [are] very intense, like tiger moms and dads assuming that he wants the absolute best. And it’s got to be, and I don’t know if that’s due to, you know, the first coach. He was very specific and very, you know... That

group is very different, and I think it would be more accepted by [our other] team than by the [team name] group of parents. Interesting, the kids themselves, I think would all be open to it.” (Haven)

Halbrook et al. (2019) research indicated that if the LGBTQ+ athlete was one of, if not the best athlete on the team, then this status within the organization gave more power to the athlete, creating greater acceptance or at least a hesitancy to “cut down” the athlete. (Halbrook et al., 2019, p. 848). Some of the interviewees in this study expressed similar attitudes to TGNC players.

“... it’s the same thing you experience with trans [players]. As soon as it impacts them, they perceive not the kids, but the parents perceive [the loss] as competitive fairness. Well, now you need to put rules in place. You can’t let that happen again because it’s not fair... The kids, you know, they’ll figure it out, but as soon as that player scored three goals and they beat us three to one as well, then that’s not fair. And it’s not fair that those players are playing in this league. ... I highly doubt that anyone is taking advantage by voluntarily putting themselves into a marginalized group so that they score a couple of extra goals in an under 15 soccer game that nobody cares about.” (Kennedy)

“Yeah, I think so, and I think it depends on the age and the level as well. ... I feel like as it gets more competitive, it’s almost like you [know], the parents feel competitive on behalf of the players. So, they’re looking for any reason why they might be able to get a one-up on the other team or something like that.” (Sawyer)

AM: Do you think a coach needs to know if a player is trans or not registered according to their assigned at birth sex?

“Tough question. Yeah, no, it really is. I think as a coach, I would want to, but only for the sake of making sure that I’m still doing my best to support that player. Not from a competitive standpoint. I don’t need to be notified that this [other club’s team] playing in a girls’ division has a boy. It’s not like I’m worried about some athletically developed boy running up the score against a bunch of girls. I don’t think that’s actually an issue. ... But I think it should be up to them when they’re registering - if they want to reach out. If they want to notify the club, then great. If they don’t, then I don’t think they should have to.” (Sawyer)

“Not in my opinion, no. Like, that’s kind of their own business, right? We are here to coach soccer, and you, teach them how to be good humans on and off the field. So, if that factored into that, they choose to share that so that we are aware of why they might be a certain way at practice. ... But no, I think people are entitled to their own.” (Pat)

“I think maybe just to be a little bit cognizant of the supports around that player and, you know, that player is probably going through something that the rest of the team isn’t.” (Jordan)

Binary gender systems provide an overarching framework of meaning that shapes and somewhat contains resistance as much as conformity. If binary gender systems are in place, there are limits on the scope of gender self-determination available to youth. When interviewees put on their “coaching hats,” they were very aware and often discussed the social constructs of “playing on a girls’ or boys’ teams.” There were reactions from both the players and their parents. For example, when asked if, as a coach, Kris had ever been questioned regarding a player’s gender, they immediately said no, but qualified it with these statements:

“... it’s just boys being awkward and weird and uncomfortable playing against girls. ...but sometimes it depends on the group of boys and girls. One time we [boys’ team] showed up for a game, and no one told us we were playing a girls’ team. We had no idea. And at that age, the girls are a foot taller. We weren’t prepared! They beat us like five or six to one or something ridiculous [like that].” (Kris)

Further along in the interview, I asked about the younger age groups.

“I think it’s more of a girls’ coaching problem. They [that U12 girls’ team] were better, but at that age, girls are just silly, so I mean it was an off day [for us]. Like, I think it would have been a competitive game if we played them ten times? I don’t know, maybe they would have won nine or eight [games]. ... But they were older [but within the age group], and they were a group of boys who were quite sensitive any time they found anything about the opposition. ... They were freaking out! They thought they were going to win twenty nothing. And then we lost. But that was that group of boys. It was nothing about the girls.” (Kris)

AM: Did the parents do or say anything?

“There were a couple of groups – actually it was a couple of moms, I think after [the game] who wanted answers. Why did we play girls today? Did you know about this? Why did we have to play against girls that are bigger than us? It makes no sense. ... I think the dads just thought it was interesting. Like you guys got your butts kicked by a bunch of girls–type comments. The moms were mad because we got beaten.” (Kris)

In the above example, the dads belittled the boys’ skills since the presumably lesser-abled (female) competition beat the boys. The moms viewed the girls’ participation in the match as unfair since they were physically bigger (no comment on the girls’ skill level), which gave them an unfair advantage.

AM: Do you think the players are more accepting of someone who is TGNC within their team, or does it matter?

“I feel like within their own team they would be, but maybe that’s just wanting to assume that they’re good kids. I feel like if there’s a girl playing on a boys’ team, [it’s assumed] that she’s good enough to be there, and the boys are accepting. But I feel like if it was a biological male who identified as a female that was playing on a girls’ team, that would not be widely accepted. And maybe that’s because of the competitive nature of the sport or because, I don’t know – any other reason. I feel there would be a certain, you know, respect or street cred that would go to a girl playing on a boys’ team, but probably the opposite if it was the other way around.” (Sawyer)

AM: How about the parents?

“I feel it’s one of those things that everybody feels the need to have an opinion on, whether they are educated on the topic or not. ... You’ll get people who are waving the old school banner, saying that that’s against the integrity of the game and blah, blah, blah – despite whether they have a background in it or not. An then you’ll get people who I mean, I wouldn’t be very loud, but I would be on the side of saying that it’s great because you’re creating an environment where people feel accepted and that’s pretty much what you support... Keyboard warriors, where people don’t have to have person to person interaction, will always have an opinion.” (Sawyer)

Further focusing on gender systems and their intersections with other systems of oppression is an effective way to improve the quality of life and opportunities for TGNC persons. But this needs to take place within an appreciation of the broader socioeconomic context.

6.3.2 THEME 2 EXPECTATIONS

For most youth sports organizations, governance and policy development are living projects. They are constantly evolving and hopefully improving the experiences of youth athletes. Therefore, it is understandable that a policy change would generate a reaction from the organization's membership. Further, my research showed that the organizations that did adopt an inclusive player policy did not necessarily receive the expected responses or the anticipated results. And more, the expected responses were not necessarily ones that aligned with the wants and desires of the TGNC youth players and their families.

AM: Tell me about your organization's inclusivity policy

“So, we started having the same sort of conversations, around 2018, trying to figure out what we should do? What kind of responsibility do we have? How do we be prepared? Nobody has come to us with the question (where does the transgender athlete register) yet, but we were looking at it from a “what if” perspective. ... I’m still not 100% happy with it, but we did put in another dropdown box for them to tell us how they identify. ... it’s just we’re not entirely sure of what’s the right words to use. It probably comes a little bit from ignorance and not being educated in it. ... so, the one thing we did say was, if somebody did identify as a female, we would allow them to play in the female division. ... we are having a hard time saying or putting it out there to people that if you identify as a male or female or non-binary, you tell us, and we’ll help you.”

... when you’ve been part of a club for a long time, you know the certain policies where it’s pretty much back and white; you can or cannot do this. I believe this

type of policy (transgender athletes and inclusivity) should be open to interpretation in a certain sense. Open to discussion and definitely should be reviewed every year and discussed based on the norms that are now acceptable. (Morgan)

Their board of directors had not adopted this organization's policy at the interview. Still, they did have a process that allowed TGNC players in the recreational program. First, the family of the TGNC player was expected to self-identify to the program manager.

“The program manager would “come to me and say – can you help me? Then we would have a discussion internally to say – what can we do? The first thing would be to reach back out to that family and have a discussion with them on how we can help them and what would make them feel comfortable.” (Morgan)

“So, we incorporated an inclusion policy. Essentially, we used the document by the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport – what a great tool. I've had people reaching out the past couple of days, and the first thing I do is point them in that direction. ... took a look at Canada Soccer and noticed that their inclusion policy was very open-ended and didn't clearly identify the support or tools in place for transgender athletes. So, then we went back to the table, and we said we were a grassroots organization which registers our players with a PSO. And I did have a discussion with the PSO where they also alluded that it's hard for them to change policies when they're seeking leadership from the NSO. ... it was a difficult process to figure out – how- how can we be inclusive. I mean, you know it's one thing to say you are inclusive and put out a policy. ... we basically wrote the policy to say that for the recreational programming, [use] the gender that you identify with.” (Spencer)

“We knew right off the bat that we might be turning people away because they get to that point and then [say that] this isn't really a safe space for me. We were going to say, here's our inclusion policy, and if you are a transgender participant, this is a home for you. This is a safe space, and you will be welcomed. Then we saw what Instagram did with pronouns and allowing people to add it to their bio and creating a safe space and the education done around that. Even if you are a straight CIS born male or female, you can create a safe space by adding your preferred pronouns. And then we said – let's add it to the game sheets, so that not only are the staff being respectful of those preferred pronouns, but now the

coaches and match officials see it and they know, and this will be an education piece.” (Spencer)

The policy created by this youth soccer organization required that each player register based on their gender identity and adopt a pronoun that would be posted to all rosters and game sheets. In addition, all TGNC athletes were encouraged to self-identify to the general manager, who would then facilitate their playing experience. The organization did acknowledge the possibility that a TGNC athlete would not want to be “outed” due to the pronouns used on the game sheets. However, the organization felt that since “their teammates are sharing pronouns as well, they would feel more welcomed and not out of place.”

Interestingly, this club is girls-only and does not allow boys to register as players. And it is only within the last five years that this club has allowed men to coach the girls’ teams. When asked about the possibility of a trans-male youth player, they felt that their club would handle it similarly to the all-girl colleges in the United States, “and it wouldn’t be a problem.” (Although they did not elaborate on it, I am assuming they are referring to process where if a student at an all-girls college transition to a male during their academic career, they are allowed to complete their degree and are not forced to withdraw.) This club has an excellent reputation for producing quality players in their province and has two players currently starting on the Canadian Women’s National Team.

The goal was not to out them but to allow them the space that if they would like at the field to be referred to as their preferred pronouns, the coach cannot mess that up because it is right there in front of them. And then, hopefully, we’re starting to shift the culture. ... then it sparks a conversation. I mean I hope that I get phone

calls [from families] to be honest. ... we've had no feedback. Nothing. Nothing crazy as of yet." (Spencer)

AM: Do you think a club or organization needs to know if a player is trans or has registered not according to their assigned at birth sex?

"No, I don't believe so, except in the event where a person may be put in a position of discomfort, perhaps. So, I'm thinking, Alison, parallel to a person having a developmental issue or disability or anxiety or something that's important for the coach to know around medications or treatment. ... [but] is this about identification or information? The parent [can] make the decision about what to share and want to share and with whom to share." (Alex)

"It's about confidentiality and discretion. It will be at the discretion of the participant if they will make their coach or team or match officials aware of it. If they would like to share their preferred pronouns and if they would like to share their gender identity, then we support it. I guess just so that they can feel comfortable being themselves." (Spencer)

"Yes! It is to give them the option if they want to tell us and if they feel comfortable telling us. So, they don't have to pick one of the two [male/female]. Because there's still a lot of confusion – men, women, male, female and what I mean in terms of what each terminology means or what it means to somebody else. So, if we don't, it doesn't necessarily paint the whole picture." (Morgan)

In 2018 there were very few resources available for the youth sports club to establish policy for TGNC athletes. The Saskatchewan Youth Soccer Association was the only soccer governing body that had recognized and established an inclusive player policy. However, the interviews for this research clearly showed that in 2020 and 2021, this was no longer the case. Each interviewee was open and receptive to discussing the topic. Some organizations represented here are in the infancy stage of their inclusive policy creation, while others have boldly forged ahead and published their inclusivity policies. The difficulty for some organizations represented in this study appears to be the lack of a template for inclusive policymaking and implementation and the scarcity of successful

implementation examples. My research showed three general approaches toward TGNC inclusivity policies and process implementation.

- The first group finds a way to achieve its objectives. The MUSC's implementation technique was like the adage – it is better to act decisively and apologize later than seek approval. For example, MUSC adopted a gender-identity registration process but did not publicize or draw attention to it. Another club achieved its objectives by doing the exact opposite. The second club promoted its new inclusive status on social media and its newsletter.
- Another form of policy implementation used by one of the study's organizations was a very cautious and controlled approach to registering TGNC youth athletes. Their method, however, requires the athlete and their family to self-identify and seek assistance from the club to individualize the player's training plan and match eligibility. Unfortunately, no TGNC player or family had come forward at the interview.
- And third, much like the interviewee who feared being “outed” by using pronouns and has chosen to wait until others do it first, some organizations represented in this study are waiting and watching those clubs and organizations that have stepped in to enable TGNC athletes to play.

Every interviewee had at least one on-field experience that involved a gender identity issue with a player or a teammate. Parental outrage was also common, especially when their child's team was on the losing end of a match. The parents' perception of unfairness due to the (usually) trans-female player is a potential area of study that would benefit youth sports organizations in their dealings with their members.

Parental reaction to a TGNC inclusive policy is an ongoing concern for these organizations. The parents' perceptions of fair play and equal access to soccer are based on the premise that it will not negatively affect their child. Clubs are cautious because the parents pay the registration fees that allow the club to operate. Any alienation of the parents (not necessarily the child) which results in them seeking out another organization is to be avoided, as it affects the club financially. Most organizations have mechanisms to monitor coach, player, and parent behaviors. Companies such as The Respect Group offer online courses that promote respect between coaches, players, match officials, and parents, on and off the field. These courses are used as educational tools by organizations as a baseline certification.

Research Question 1: How are some youth soccer organizations in Canada interpreting or pursuing the development of gender-inclusive youth player policies?

This study's group of youth sports leaders fully supports the idea of enabling all TGNC youth to participate in sport and soccer in particular. Three of the six organizations have modified their registration processes in the background, and two have loudly self-proclaimed their inclusive policies. The remaining three organizations seem to be waiting for a reaction from parents, officials, or governing bodies before acting on any inclusive policy development initiatives.

The theme of *inclusivity with conditions* speaks to the desire at the higher level of some organizations to control the perceived impact of allowing TGNC players and their families to register. For example, requiring a TGNC player to self-identify before

registering, specifically to manage their sport development pathway, runs counter to recommended strategies from the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport and other authors. Similarly, requiring a TGNC (or any) player to choose their pronouns for publication on official game sheets forces these youth players to make decisions that some are not ready to make. The directors were dedicated to the public perception of inclusivity for their clubs. They wanted to be “seen” as inclusive. Sadly, by forcing these players into decisions and curated development pathways, their policies serve to single these players out and increase their marginalization.

The least player-intrusive policy from amongst the organizations represented in this study allows the player to choose based on gender identity. This empowers the TGNC player and their family to make their own decision. Youth sport organizations are not the gatekeepers of players’ gender identities. However, they are stewards of the beautiful game and should take every opportunity to grow and develop players.

Expectations, as a theme, were evident in those organizations that showed the desire to control any TGNC player registrations. Whether through pronouns or individualized player development, they were surprised that no TGNC families had registered or come to discuss “the situation” with them. Other expectations were based on parents’ right to assume fair play and the disconnect between the organization’s definition and theirs.

Research Question 2: What are the effects, if any, of a gender-inclusive policy on club operations as experienced by coaches and administrators?

All interviewees had direct or indirect experiences with a TGNC youth player. In the absence of an organizational policy, they relied on their on-field coaching experience to manage the situation. However, coaches and administrators identified parental reaction to TGNC players as a significant concern, with the potential of substantial impact on the club's bottom line. Coach respondents in this study were further divided on the need-to-know issue regarding a player's gender identity. If the respondent felt that the coach needed to know if a player was TGNC, it was based on caution for the player's welfare.

As non-profits, youth sports organizations rely almost exclusively on registration fees to run their programs. If parents are unhappy with the club's policies, procedures, or operations, they have the option to leave at the end of a season.

Unfortunately, for organizations that have adopted a gender-inclusive policy, it is too early for them to fully realize the impact of the new policies on their financial status. These organizations had not registered any TGNC youth players at the interview.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

Sports associations are adopting and adapting processes and policies regarding TGNC athletes' eligibility - in the name of fair competition. These formal organizational policies also represent an organization's public face because they reflect the endorsed and often publicly available articulations of its standpoint on specific issues (Shaw & Frisby, 2006). TGNC athletes have pointed out how cisgender privilege has made sport a less inclusive space. These individuals found sport unwelcoming because the traditional feminine, masculine, or even hyper-masculine narratives that prevail in sport alienate those who do not conform. Making sport a more inclusive space for diverse gendered participants will empower marginalized individuals (Gleaves & Lehrbach, 2016). Since the vast majority of Canadian sport participation is at the recreational or developmental level, adopting welcoming and inclusive policies and practices at this level will have the greatest impact (Ainsworth, 2016, p. 4). But due to sports' inherent gendered binary structure, these benefits are denied to those who do not identify with the male-female categorizations.

This case study looked at inclusivity policies of youth soccer organizations pertaining to trans and gender non-conforming youth athletes through the lived experiences of parents, coaches, and administrators. The interview candidates in this study were aware of TGNC youth athletes. This awareness was most acute with the on-field lived experiences of parents and team officials. This finding parallels Kim et al. (2020), who concluded: "that community-based youth sport programs play a role as a social vehicle promoting community cohesion." (Kim et al., 2020, p. 191).

Youth soccer organizations in the group are addressing (if they have not done so already) the need for change in policies and processes to reflect gender inclusivity not discussed previously. However, even within this small sample group, the approach taken by the organizations that had inclusivity policies varied widely, as most provincial governing bodies do not have clearly defined gender inclusivity policies.

The Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport (CCES) released a document in 2016 entitled, “Creating Inclusive Environments for Trans Participants in Canadian Sport - Guidance for Sport Organizations”(Ainsworth, 2016). It is the misfortune of the youth sport community that this document is not well-publicized nor well distributed. I wish I had known about it in 2019 when I rewrote MUSC’s player registration policy, as it addresses many of the club’s concerns.

Developed in consultation with the Trans Inclusion in Sport Expert Working Group, the CCES document would benefit youth sports organizations looking to establish TGNC inclusivity policies. It provides an excellent starting point as it was written from the perspective of the trans community. Topics such as Best Practices for the Physical, Verbal and Emotional Environment; Enforcement, Disputes and Complaints and for Coaches and Athletes. Their discussion on Allyship and what that looks like is remarkable in its simplicity and applicability not only to a TGNC youth player but to all youth players: *compassion and empathy, active listening, providing support, facilitating frank and upfront discussions, learning about [cisgender] privileges, maintaining openness and a willingness to learn, saying something. Just like identities, oppressions*

*intersect, so while addressing transphobia, you can also address instances of racism, classism, and sexism – to name just a few.*⁴

7.1 CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has contributed to the knowledge pool of youth sport policies for TGNC youth athletes. In so doing, it showed that youth soccer organizations recognize the need to create new spaces inclusive of all players. Through case study methodology, the lived experiences of individuals on the front line of player interactions and policy development and implementation were investigated. The results highlight that youth clubs and organizations need to develop inclusive policies, implementation plans, and communication strategies. These three areas form a pathway for sports leaders to best support clubs and organizations as they move towards inclusive programming.

The obvious limitation is that this case study is not generalizable. These findings do not necessarily represent the experiences or perspectives of other coaches or all local clubs. Furthermore, the study cannot be repeated and reproduced since it is based on unique circumstances and lived experiences.

As potential future research, it would be valuable to reconnect with the organizations from this study (and others) to see if the policies were implemented and how their respective memberships received them and what effects, if any, these policies had on club operations. It would also be informative to conduct interviews during an active season (not hampered by COVID).

⁴ <http://cces.ca/sites/default/files/content/docs/pdf/cces-transinclusionpolicyguidance-e.pdf>

MUSC continues with its gender-identity-based player registration. To date, the club has not experienced any negative repercussions due to the policy change. I hope and believe that these discussions regarding inclusivity and policy development will continue among youth sport leaders. Ultimately all athletes should have the right to gender self-determination in the sport of their choice. On March 24th, 2022, the Calgary Minor Soccer Association amended their player registration process to allow all players to register based on their gender identity.

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Appendix A-1: RECRUITMENT EMAIL
(sent to MUSC volunteer age group coordinators)

Looking for Feedback

In September 2019, MUSC implemented a gender-inclusive registration process for all youth players, U3 to U17. As a result, players were able to register for the season based on their gender identity. This research study explores the experiences of volunteers, coaches, and trainers in light of the new policy.

We are looking for volunteer age group coordinators willing to participate in a 30-minute phone, Skype, or Zoom interview to discuss their experiences with this new process or other gender-inclusive policies. Participation is voluntary, and the confidentiality of participants will be maintained. Your or your child's affiliation with or access to services offered by the MUSC will not be affected whether you participate or not in this study. The results of this research will potentially enhance our understanding of the effects of a gender-inclusive process on players, parents, and team officials with a goal towards establishing an inclusive sports policy for trans and gender non-conforming children.

To participate, please respond to this email or contact me directly at Alison Meaney: ameaney@uleth.ca (403-585-7141).

Appendix A-2: RECRUITMENT EMAIL
(sent to MUSC Technical Staff)

Looking for Feedback

In September 2019, MUSC implemented a gender-inclusive registration process for all youth players, U3 to U17. As a result, players were able to register for the season based on their gender identity. This research study explores the experiences of volunteers, trainers, and coaches considering the new policy.

We are looking for team officials and technical staff willing to participate in a 30-minute phone, Skype, or Zoom interview to discuss their experiences with this new process or other gender-inclusive policies. Participation is voluntary, and the confidentiality of participants will be maintained. Your affiliation with or access to services offered by the MUSC will not be affected whether you participate or not in this study. The results of this research will potentially enhance our understanding of the effects of a gender-inclusive process on players, parents, and team officials with a goal towards establishing an inclusive sports policy for trans and gender non-conforming children.

To participate, please respond to this email or contact me directly at Alison Meaney: ameaney@uleth.ca (403-585-7141).

Appendix A-3: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

(sent to district members' senior technical directors, administrators, and ASA Grassroots director)

Looking for Feedback

In September 2019, MUSC implemented a gender-inclusive registration process for all youth players, U3 to U17. As a result, players were able to register for the season based on their gender identity. This research study explores the experiences of administrators, volunteers, trainers, and coaches in light of the new policy or the potential of a new policy within their organization.

We are looking for senior technical staff and administrators external to MUSC willing to participate in a 30-minute phone, Skype, or Zoom interview to discuss their experiences with this new process or other gender-inclusive policies. Participation is voluntary, and the confidentiality of participants will be maintained. The results of this research will potentially enhance our understanding of the effects of a gender-inclusive process on players, parents, and team officials, with a goal towards establishing an inclusive sports policy for trans and gender non-conforming children.

To participate, please respond to this email or contact me directly at Alison Meaney: ameaney@uleth.ca (403-585-7141).

Appendix B-1: THANKS, AND WELCOME
(sent to all MUSC based participants)

Hello Age Group Coordinators and Coaches

Thank you for responding to the participation email for this research project. Below is a summary of the project and what you can expect as a participant.

This project aims to assess the effect the club's recently implemented gender-inclusive registration process has had on the players and their families, primarily – but not exclusively - at the grassroots level. Participation in the research study is voluntary, and your confidentiality as a participant will be maintained. The results of this research will enhance the understanding of the effects of a gender-inclusive process on players, parents, and team officials, with a goal towards establishing an inclusive sports policy for trans and gender non-conforming children.

If you agree to participate, the interview will be via an online platform (Skype or Zoom) or over the phone. With your permission, the conversation will be audio recorded. There will be a series of open-ended questions about this past indoor season. The duration of the discussion will be approximately 30 minutes, depending on your responses. You will be able to ask any questions before the interview, skip a question(s) if you're not comfortable, or withdraw at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw from the study, you'll be asked to decide the fate of any information you have shared. And if you'd like to learn more, I can share the study's findings with you as well.

If you'd like to participate, please complete, and return the attached consent form.

Looking forward to it!

Thanks,

Alison Meaney

403.585.7141

a.meaney@uleth.ca

Appendix B-2: THANKS, AND WELCOME
(sent to all non-MUSC based participants)

Hello TDs and Administrators

Thank you for responding to the participation email for this research project. Below is a summary of the project and what you can expect as a participant.

One of this project's objectives is to assess the club's recently implemented gender-inclusive registration process within the context of other district clubs and the provincial programs, primarily – but not exclusively - at the grassroots level. Participation in the research study is voluntary, and your confidentiality as a participant will be maintained. The results of this research will enhance the understanding of the effects of a gender-inclusive process on players, parents, and team officials, with a goal towards establishing an inclusive sports policy for trans and gender non-conforming children.

If you agree to participate, the interview will be via an online platform (Skype or Zoom) or over the phone. With your permission, the conversation will be audio recorded. There will be a series of open-ended questions about this past indoor season. The duration of the discussion will be approximately 30 minutes, depending on your responses. You'll be able to ask any questions before starting the interview, skip a question(s) if you're not comfortable, or withdraw at any time without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you'll be asked to decide the fate of any information you have shared. And if you'd like to learn more, I can share the study's findings with you as well.

If you'd like to participate, please complete, and return the attached consent form.

Looking forward to it!

Thanks,

Alison Meaney

403.585.7141

a.meaney@uleth.ca

Appendix C: LETTER OF CONSENT FOR ALL PARTICIPANTS

(Written on UofL letterhead)

Gender Inclusive Registration for Youth Soccer

A Case Study

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research study that looks at MUSC's recently implemented gender-inclusive registration process for all youth players, wherein players were able to register for the season based on their gender identity. This research study explores the experiences of grassroots families, coaches, technical directors, and administrators in light of the new policy, both internal to MUSC and external to other clubs, CMSA, and ASA. The information collected from this study will be presented in a master's thesis, in addition to other scholarly publications and presentations (no personal identification will be disclosed).

This research will require about 30 minutes of your time for a one-on-one (phone/Skype/Zoom) interview at a time of mutual agreement. During this time, you will be interviewed about the soccer-based experiences of your child since the implementation of MUSC's gender-inclusive registration process. The interview will be audio-recorded

with your permission. If you do not wish to be audio recorded, I will take written notes during the interview with your consent.

There are no direct benefits to you from participating in this study; however, you will be contributing to the development of inclusive policies in youth soccer.

For some participants, the recounting of experiences may evoke some emotions and broader questioning of parenting. For others, it may prompt some self-reflection. At any time, should this occur, you can pause to collect your thoughts, skip the question, or stop altogether.

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. If applicable, your or your child's affiliation with or access to services offered by the MUSC will not be affected whether you participate or not in this study. Your continued participation should be as informed as to your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation. You may choose not to answer any question, or you may withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. If you do this, you will be asked to determine the fate of your information already collected.

Your anonymity and confidentiality will be ensured in several ways. Only I will have access to audio recordings. A non-disclosure agreement binds the company used for transcribing the soundtracks. All the data collected in this study will be kept in a locked home office safe and on a password-protected computer, and only I will have access to them. The transcript will be edited to remove any personally identifying information. The audio-recording will not be used for any purpose other than data collection. The transcript and audio recording will be held for five years, following the successful completion of

my master's thesis for this research study. The thesis and any other presentations will not contain any mention of your name, and pseudonyms will be used for any quotations used. If you are quoted directly, you will be contacted before publication or dissemination of any findings to verify the contextual integrity as well as to ensure there are no errors in your statement(s).

The results of this study will be presented in scholarly publications and presentations. A lay summary may be presented to the Alberta Soccer Association and the Calgary Minor Soccer Association. At no time, however, will your name be used, or any identifying information revealed. If you wish to receive a summary of the results from this study, you may contact me at a.meaney@uleth.ca.

If you require any additional information about this study, please call me at 403-585-7141 or email me at a.meaney@uleth.ca. You may also contact my supervisor, Dr. Robbin Derry, at 403-765-4321 or associate.professor@uleth.ca. Questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research may be addressed to the Office of Research Ethics, University of Lethbridge (Phone: 403-329-2747 or email: research.services@uleth.ca).

This research project has been reviewed for ethical acceptability and approved by the University of Lethbridge Human Participant Research Committee. Thank you for your consideration.

I agree to the audio-recording of the interview.

_____ (Printed Name of Participant)

_____ (Signature)

_____ (Date)

I have read (or have been read) the above information regarding this research case study on **Gender Inclusive Registration for Youth Soccer**, and consent to participate in this study.

_____ (Printed Name of Participant)

_____ (Signature)

_____ (Date)

_____ (Printed Name of Researcher)

_____ (Signature)

_____ (Date)

Thank you,

Alison Meaney

University of Lethbridge

403-585-7141

a.meaney@uleth.ca

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Appendix D: PARTICIPANT DATA FORM

Gender Inclusive Registration for Youth Soccer

A Case Study

Interview Participant Information

Name	
Method of Interview (Phone, Skype, Zoom)	
Name of Your Organization	
What is your position within your organization?	
Are you or have you ever coached youth sports?	
How long have you been with your current organization?	
How can I get in touch with you?	

Appendix E: INTERVIEW SCRIPT AND GUIDING QUESTIONS
(for Parents and Age Group Coordinators)

Thanks for meeting me today! As you know, this study is looking at the effects of the club's gender-inclusive procedure. I have some general questions, but if you would like to expand on a topic, please feel free to do so. If there is a question you don't want to answer, we can skip it, no problem. The same thing applies if you would like to end the interview or withdraw your participation at any point, just let me know. If you would like to withdraw, I'll ask you what you'd like done with the information you've already submitted.

With your permission, I would like to record our interview so I can accurately transcribe your words and review what you've said. If you are not comfortable, I can make notes only. *(Turn on recorder if the participant has consented to be recorded).*

Background

The issue of sport *and* gender or sport *in* gender has come to the forefront again with the Caster Semenya case, where a high-profile national athlete challenged the establishment of a sport governing body. Although she lost her case, Semenya's suit highlighted the disconnect between established, sedentary governing bodies and the athletes that are competing in their sport. The physiological and psychological benefits of sport are unquestioned. Then why is a segment of the population excluded based on their gender identity? This study looks at one soccer club's attempt at gender inclusivity for youth athletes by adopting a gender identity-based registration process.

Since soccer is played based on binary genders, all players must choose to play in either a female or a male league. For the TGNC player, this presents a problem since they do not either identify or conform to their birth gender. The new registration process enabled parents and guardians to register their youth player(s) based on their gender identity and into the league of their choice.

Questions

This indoor season, each guardian registered their player based on their gender identity. The club changed the registration form to enable players to play based on their gender identity.

- If you registered your child, how was the experience of your child playing on the team of their choice?
- Was the change in registration policy an issue or a non-issue amongst your child's teammates?
- Was it an issue or a non-issue amongst the parent group?
- Have you had or heard about any concerns about the inclusion or exclusion of players?
- Has your child expressed any feelings of inclusion or exclusion or any positive or negative reactions from others?
- Is there anything you'd like to add?

Appendix F: INTERVIEW SCRIPT AND GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR COACHES

Thanks for meeting me today! As you know, this study is looking at the consequences of the club's gender-inclusive procedure. I have some general questions, but if you'd like to expand on a topic, please feel free to do so. If there's a question you don't want to answer, we can skip it, no problem. The same thing applies if you'd like to end the interview or withdraw your participation at any point, just let me know. If you'd like to withdraw, I'll ask you what you'd like done with the information you've already submitted.

With your permission, I'd like to record our interview so I can accurately transcribe your words and review what you've said. If you're not comfortable, I can make notes only.

(Turn on recorder if the participant has consented to be recorded).

Background

The issue of sport *and* gender or sport *in* gender has come to the forefront again with the Caster Semenya case, where a high-profile national athlete challenged the establishment of a sport governing body. Although she lost her case, Semenya's suit highlighted the disconnect between established, sedentary governing bodies and the athletes that are competing in their sport. The physiological and psychological benefits of sport are unquestioned. Then why is a segment of the population excluded based on their gender identity? This study looks at one soccer club's attempt at gender inclusivity for youth athletes by adopting a gender identity-based registration process.

Since soccer is played based on binary genders, all players must choose to play in either a female or a male league. For the TGNC player, this presents a problem since they do not either identify or conform to their birth gender. The new registration process enabled parents and guardians to register their youth player(s) based on their gender identity and into the league of their choice.

Questions

This indoor season, each guardian registered their player based on their gender identity. The club changed the registration process to enable players to play based on their gender identity.

- Have any parents approached you regarding the club's new registration process?
What happened?
- Have you observed interactions between players related to a player's gender identity?
- Have you observed or heard about reactions between parents related to other player's gender identity?
- Have you observed or heard coaches discussing issues related to player's gender identity and the club's gender policy?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Appendix G: INTERVIEW SCRIPT AND GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR OTHER ORGANIZATIONS' STAFF

Thanks for meeting me today! As you know, this study is looking at the consequences of the club's gender-inclusive registration process. I have some general questions, but if you'd like to expand on a topic, please feel free to do so. If there's a question you don't want to answer, we can skip it, no problem. The same thing applies if you'd like to end the interview or withdraw your participation at any point, just let me know. If you'd like to withdraw, I'll ask you what you'd like done with the information you've already submitted.

With your permission, I'd like to record our interview so I can accurately transcribe your words and review what you've said. If you're not comfortable, I can make notes only. *(Turn on recorder if the participant has consented to be recorded).*

Background

The issue of sport *and* gender or sport *in* gender has come to the forefront again with the Caster Semenya case, where a high-profile national athlete challenged the establishment of a sport governing body. Although she lost her case, Semenya's suit highlighted the disconnect between established, sedentary governing bodies and the athletes that are competing in their sport. The physiological and psychological benefits of sport are unquestioned. Then why is a segment of the population excluded based on their gender identity? This study looks at one soccer club's attempt at gender inclusivity for youth athletes by adopting a gender identity-based registration process.

Since soccer is played based on binary genders, all players must choose to play in either a female or a male league. For the TGNC player, this presents a problem since they do not either identify or conform to their birth gender. The new registration process enabled parents and guardians to register their youth player(s) based on their gender identity and into the league of their choice.

Questions

- Does your organization have a gender-inclusive policy or process? If yes, how have players, parents, and coaches responded to the new procedure?
- Have any parents approached you regarding the club's gender-inclusive registration process? What happened?
- Have you observed interactions between players related to a player's gender identity?
- Have you observed or heard about reactions between parents related to other player's gender identity?
- Have you observed or heard coaches discussing issues related to players' gender identity and the club's gender policy?
- Are you aware of any other sport-related policies or procedures regarding gender-inclusivity?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add?