



Collaborative Autoethnography for Feminist Research

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INTRODUCTION

Recent research on transgender children and youth suggests that strong parental support helps achieve greater quality of life and positive well-being, and helps reduce risk of self-harm, depression, and suicide. However,

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the challenges that some parents face in supporting and advocating for their youth are immense, and only a fraction of parents will end up engaging in ally-ship and activism with, or on behalf of, their children.

As critical scholars deeply interested in feminist practices of disrupting, exposing, and critically analysing social and structural power, making room for the unspoken, unseen, invisible aspects of labour and taking action towards a more just society, collaborative autoethnography (CAE) appealed to us. As a team of critical scholars, we are driven ontologically towards pushing the boundaries of traditional epistemologies. We place value on interpreting the self as an artefact, whose voice is but a creation and a reckoning of the spaces in which we reside. The vulnerability of showing oneself in autoethnography (Lorde, 1984) is contrary to the traditional research ethos of participant confidentiality. In choosing collaborative autoethnographic as a form of advocacy, our stories do not end at the production of this research; rather, we hope they live on in our appeal for social justice (Bochner & Ellis, 2016b).

Authors of this chapter are parents of trans and gender diverse children or their allies and have engaged in advocacy work. This chapter presents how CAE was deployed through both face-to-face and online meetings between five Canadian scholars who are deeply engaged in advocating for trans children and youth and offers a reflection about their experiences in participating in such a process.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how collaborative autoethnography as a feminist research methodology and practice may be actioned in social work. We intentionally include personal and historical narratives, as both researcher and participant, in constructing parent-advocate selves (Chang et al., 2012), realizing we cannot write these representations of ourselves in a vacuum (Bochner & Ellis, 2016a, b,

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p. 131). Aligned with the tenets of feminist practice, collaborative autoethnography incorporates self-examination within a team of cooperating researchers (Chang et al., 2012). This process increases accountability and may participate in shaping our anti-oppressive lenses and development of ethical consciousness (Caron et al., 2020) in a research process aimed at highlighting the invisible in society and disrupting dominant narratives through an interrogation of the self.

This chapter is methodological in nature, describing how a group of academic mothers and allies of trans and gender diverse children used feminist methodologies to unpack our engagement with advocacy work. As we detail our process, we also keep close in mind the paper we wish we had as an interdisciplinary team to guide us through our use of collaborative autoethnography (CAE) and arts-based methods. Importantly, this inquiry is part of a larger research project exploring parental advocacy for gender diverse, creative, and trans children and youth. This case study aims to evoke an ‘experience near’ or insider view of the ways in which parental advocacy is performed by the researcher-participants and is limited by their social locations.

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Until recently, the experience of parenting a gender non-conforming child has been “culturally unintelligible” (Rahilly, 2015, p. 342), and transgender children and their families were publicly invisible (Manning et al., 2015). Similar to transgender adults, they were subject to systemic processes of “erasure” (Namaste, 2000), scarcely mentioned in mainstream media. For decades, North American gender diverse children were pathologized and considered subjects for therapeutic intervention, much like LGBTQ+ children (Bryant, 2006). Professional support for gender non-conforming children advised universally reinforcing heteronormative, binary gender expression and repressing signs of gender diversity (e.g. Zucker, 2008); this led to the “non apparent” status of childhood gender nonconformity (Hellen, 2009). When researchers or clinicians focused on parents, it was through the framework of parental psycho-pathology (Pyne, 2014, citing Owen-Anderson et al., 2010; Zucker & Bradley, 1995), and specifically through a lens of “mother blame” (Caplan, 2000). This pathological perspective remains powerful in society (Elichberger et al., 2016; Grossman et al., 2005), and women remain vulnerable to what Johnson and Benson (2014, p. 124) call the “secondary stigma of mothering a transgender child”.

The establishment of Gender Creative Kids Canada in 2013, the first Canadian organization dedicated to advocating for and supporting transgender and gender diverse children and families (Sansfaçon & Manning, 2015), coincided with rights challenges prompted by Canadian parents. Since 2013, parents have become active in provincial rights-based advocacy (British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Quebec), as well as in efforts to include gender identity in the Canadian Charter of Human Rights. Canadian parents sought out online advocacy communities. Parents began blogging or writing about their experiences, attending and running support groups, attending conferences, consulting with therapists and professionals with experience in children's gender diversity. Parents began educating and negotiating with their children's school communities and healthcare professionals (Manning, 2017; Travers, 2018). Strong parental support is shown to reduce youth suicide attempts by as much as 93% (Travers et al., 2012), yet parent advocates' needs are rarely examined. Given that parents who support their children's gender diversity face transphobic oppression and discrimination (Cowden & Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2012; Pullen-Sansfaçon et al., 2015; Riley et al., 2011), and that this transphobia is aggravated by other forms of oppression linked to sexual orientation, race, class, and ability (Mullaly, 2010; Saketopoulou, 2011), this is a glaring omission. Parental advocacy encompasses ethical dilemmas of safety, privacy, and personal risk. It demands significant time, energy, resources, and emotional labour (Hochschild, 1985; Meadow, 2011) and is also strongly gendered work (Kualanka et al., 2014; Rahilly, 2015): in an era of "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996, pp. 6–9) mothers end up doing the labour to create safe worlds around their and other transgender and gender diverse children. In their study of mothers of transgender girls, Kualanka et al. (2014) found that while the mothers initially lacked education on transgender issues, they rapidly became 'expert' advocates. This public advocacy often extends from the mothers' personal processes of convincing others that their children's identities were valid, corresponding with feminist theories about intersectional thinking and privilege-checking that challenge 'everyday sexism' and exclusionary forms of representations (Robinson & Ross, 2013; Schuster, 2016).

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY IN RESEARCH

Autoethnography is a suitable methodology for researchers writing and exploring effusive issues (Tetnowski & Damico, 2014). Autoethnographic writing moves away from traditional disengaged reason and distanced

analysis towards an intimate and vulnerable narrative that aims to emotionally connect people in the name of social justice (Bochner & Ellis, 2016a, p. 62). Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) approach was used to document their experience of advocacy. CAE is a qualitative methodology that promotes community-building between participants and can, by its process, become transformative for participants. Where autoethnography focuses on the researcher self, collaborative autoethnography incorporates self-examination within a team of cooperating researchers. CAE increases autoethnography's accountability as a research process born out of understanding society by interrogating the self and is defined as "a qualitative research method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively to gain a meaningful understanding of sociocultural phenomena reflected in their autobiographical data" (Chang, et al., 2012, pp. 23–24).

USING ART IN RESEARCH

Leading scholar of arts education Eisner argues that "science can be regarded as a species of research; so too can the arts" (2006, p. 9). As Cahnmann-Taylor suggests, "the literary, visual, and performing arts offer ways to stretch a researcher's capacities for creativity and knowing, creating a healthy synthesis of approaches to collect, analyze, and represent data in ways that paint a full picture of a heterogeneous movement to improve education" (2013 p. 4). Arts-based research crosses disciplinary boundaries to illustrate lines of significant connection shared between creation, learning, and knowing (Finley, 2011; Piantanida et al., 2003).

Following decades of decolonial, feminist, and poststructural thought, critical creative inquiry challenges the notion of art and science as mutually exclusive intellectual domains (Finley & Knowles, 1995; Finley, 2011). Arts-based scholars contend that social scientific inquiry in the qualitative paradigm has been limited by narrow understandings of legitimacy, reliability, and validity (Eisner, 1981; Seale, 1999; Siegesmund, 2014). For many qualitative researchers, doing arts-based research is a way of learning what can take form at the intersections of creative and scientific scholarship (Barry, 1996; Leavy, 2009). It is also a way to challenge what counts as scholarly knowledge, even within the qualitative realm of scholarship that does not always see meaning in aesthetic ways of knowing social and institutional worlds (Barone et al., 1997; Piantanida et al., 2003).

METHODOLOGY

CAE as a method allows the research team to approach parental advocacy as a type of gendered ‘work’ that recognizes a large commitment of time, energy, resources, and emotional labour. CAE and arts-based methods open up the many affective and ethically fraught challenges that some parents face as advocates. Further, it allows us to critically examine our own situations, how gender, heteronormativity, whiteness, class, and geography shape collective advocacy strategies, especially in the context of pre-existing transgender rights organizations.

SITUATING THE PARTICIPANT-RESEARCHERS

The researcher-participants are all white or white-passing, cisgender, academic mothers. In many ways, the whiteness of our team is not surprising: the Canadian academy has remained stubbornly white despite the near universal adoption of equity policies (Henry et al., 2017). At the same time, in the context of a settler-colonial state, racialized parents of transgender children are less visible in public advocacy work than white parents (Rahilly, 2015). Importantly, the researcher-participants, as described above, do not represent the social locations of the team members of the larger project or all authors on this chapter. In our efforts to disrupt the homogeneous researcher-participant team, the additional authors (graduate students and research assistants) include trans, non-binary, and Indigenous folks.

ESTABLISHING A RELATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

We chose CAE as a method of exploration and analysis precisely for its profoundly enquiring, revelatory, and transformative aspects to better understand the experiences, challenges, strategies, and practices of advocating for trans kids. We also chose CAE because community-building is integral to the process, and not only did our research team require a method of information exchange that could develop trust, but we needed one that allowed us to explore experiences that disrupted the normative academic modes of investigation and authorship (Ellis et al., 2011). Our in-person meetings involved five or six team members meeting over three days. We also intentionally built in downtime (communally self-funded) given that both the cognitive and emotional toll of collaborative inquiry

can be exhausting. This downtime was not meant to be part of the formal research exploration but intended to be self-care. We quickly observed that there is no hard line between interactive explorative research engagement; our enquiries were all productive of hitherto unrecognized aspects of advocating for trans youth, sometimes painful aspects of our advocacy, and still revelatory in ways impossible to anticipate. CAE doesn't occur in strictly work-defined spaces; it is performed when the group focuses together on the issue at hand (parent advocacy of trans kids), and this can be at the meeting table or at the dinner table. At the same time, throughout our CAE explorations, we were both mindful and often reminded of a gendered aspect to our academic research. As London et al. (2012) argue, the experience of working in competitive institutions, such as universities and colleges, is gendered and one potent aspect of this gendering is the "detection of gender-rejection threat and, to protect against rejection, ... self-silencing" (p. 962). Our CAE incorporated work-spaces, arts-based spaces, and downtime or calming spaces.

BEGINNING, RE-ENTERING, AND TRANSFORMATIVE CONVERSATIONS

While some of us had used autoethnography as a method, and some had engaged with arts-based methods, few had ever combined the two into research projects. Our first face-to-face meeting in our Montreal hotel involved seven researchers; we met the first night and got to know one another; some people had worked together before in person, and others had collaborated on research remotely. We planned meetings the next morning in a university meeting room and subsequently held meetings at a local Art Hive, in one of the larger of our hotel rooms, and in local restaurants. The agenda included strategic planning, social action research and CAE training (led by individuals from our team), ethical considerations (primarily devoted to examining our critical whiteness), and the involvement of graduate students in our research, team roles, and decision-making processes.

While CAE was a major emphasis of our project planning as a methodological learning outcome, it quickly blended with our impromptu arts-based session at the local Art Hive into a fundamental, but not fully planned, part of the research output of this meeting. Art Hives "create multiple opportunities for dialogue, skill sharing, and art making between people of differing socio-economic backgrounds, ages, cultures and abilities" (ART HIVES n.d.) (Image 6.1).

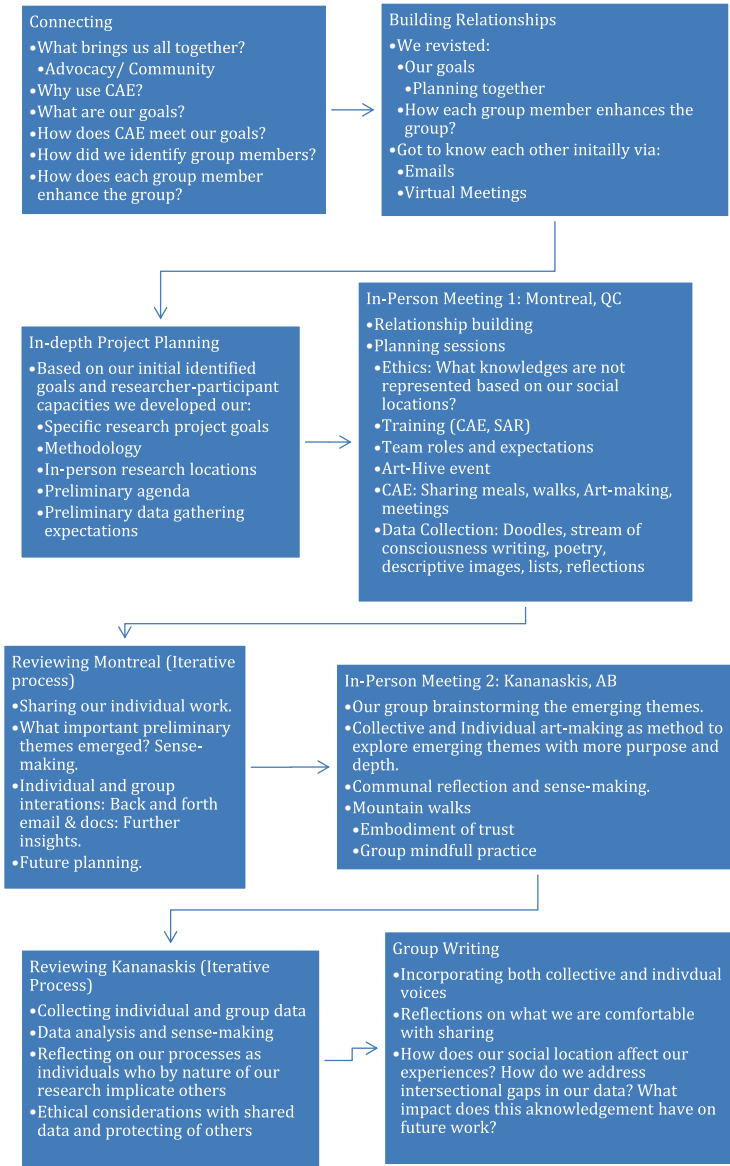


Image 6.1 Research team at Art Hive

CAE melded into urban walks around Montreal that precipitated conversations about shared experiences, shared fears, and recognitions of intersecting skills and experiential backgrounds with a resonant, recurrent question, “What do we already know collectively about parental advocacy, individually and systemically?”

The three-day meeting ended with a spontaneous social outing; we utilized this ‘downtime’ by noting that CAE can continue in less-focused and more free-flowing interpretive spaces. Our outing made palpable even more realizations of the stress, the physical burden, the inability to otherwise ‘turn off’, and the stark situational power differentials between group members that most of us felt differently but unconsciously, all key insights that informed our research. Such self-reflection and self-reflexivity leads to a self-respect where proximity in the CAE process works to open our concerns, emotions, and experiences generally. In this respect, time to emotively reflect reveals the gendering and racializing of emotion, what Sullivan (2014) explains as “how race and class intersect with gendered emotional expectations and demands” (p. 136), which also works to situate ourselves as white or white-passing, and to examine the racialized identities clearly missing from this aspect of our research. Here we reflected on “what we believe doesn’t work, our confidence in these knowings, and who we need to engage help us unpack what we don’t know”. Further, following our meeting we each emailed to the others a document capturing the key themes that stood out individually of our experience, documents which took the form of large-scale doodles, stream of consciousness writing, poems, word-and-image pieces, lists, and expository reflections.

Art, Craft, and Embodiment

Our second meeting was more organized methodologically, because it involved producing content based on our training in CAE from our face-to-face meeting in Montreal. For this reason, this second meeting held in Kananaskis, Alberta, included a heavy component of arts-based materials that we brought with us to the meeting. In addition to paper, pens, cell phones with cameras, and computers, we brought coloured pencils, crayons, plasticine, glue, yarn, beads, coloured paper, figurines, craft supplies, pixel art, paint, markers, colouring pages, and used the hotel projector.

We used group brainstorming to observe thematic outcomes of our last meeting. Next, we narrowed our focus to certain themes and concepts of our CAE research. We reflected on “how our interconnection between the

personal and professional influences all of our questions?” We communally participated in dedicated art-making directed by our early themes to develop expressions, trajectories, manifestations, and explorations of those themes emerging from documents that were not primarily word-based or expository. We utilized art-making as a way to refocus our engagement, to consider differently—less consciously or less intentionally—the themes, and to shift our emotional focus from immersion in those themes to a more balanced reflection that would take off some of the pressure, but still open hitherto unrecognized avenues of focus.

The mountain setting of this meeting was awe-inspiring. The aesthetic experience of walking mountain paths or simply viewing the mountain-scape itself instigated a communal experience of the sublime: a cathartic, liberatory, emotional release with one another of the pride we feel, the fear, the exhaustion, and the protection over the children for whom we advocate. This was an experience that both made us recognize the firmly embodied experience of advocating for trans youth, and also how we carry on largely by putting that experience on the back-burner: the mountain-scape played a role in our CAE practice of pulling our interiorized, embodied selves out and into the light of mutual self-recognition (Fig. 6.1).

INSIGHTS

Through our CAE process shown in Fig. 6.1, encapsulating reflexivity and repeated iteration of emergent themes we found five (5) key insights. First and not surprisingly, all members prioritized health. Existing hospital policies and healthcare experiences can expose trans youth to potentially harmful practices, either by omission of or by restrictions to affirmative services. Our voices are needed to educate and negotiate the physical and mental health of trans youth at the service and policy level of care.

Secondly, through exercises of writing five-minute reflections on our work and, later, on our workshop, through morning activities of ‘checking in’ with one another, and through mapping out aesthetically in the Art Hive the forms, patterns, and images that emerge in reflecting on advocacy work materially, we found new ways of considering and connecting what we do. Patterns and structures—whether in paintings, yarn-work, beading, drawing, or sculpting with found objects—manifested as a combination of bold symbols of gratitude and maze-like maps of survival.

The third insight, stimulated by and evolved through art-making, was the recognition of issues not often considered ‘parenting’ issues, obvious



Fig. 6.1 Developing a collaborative autoethnography process

forms of advocacy, or lived realities of resilience amongst parent advocates and trans children. Our art-making induced silent contemplations that led to riskier conversations about the advocacy experience: fears, frustrations, and the recognition that gender, sexuality, and a history of care- or trauma-work plays a larger role in advocacy than previously considered. Art-making put a spotlight on the mundane or repetitive activities of everyday life that comprised much of our advocacy practices, whether these are extraordinary practices of public activism or private acts of parental support. Creativity unlocked key features of CAE, namely the effort needed to trust and believe in not only others but oneself, leading to gambles in self-study. We trusted each other—people in many ways we barely knew—to reveal that we all live in various states of urgency, a theme that took on new meaning in our considerations.

Fourth, our research examined the intersections of our identities as scholar, advocate, parent as self, parent as protector. Our methods sought

to address our responsibility as affirmative parents, described by Pullen Sansfaçon, Robichaud, and Dumais-Michaud (2015) as “the parents’ desire to protect their children and place their safety above all else, including social norms and expectations”. Through CAE we were able to disrupt traditional notions of consent, challenge how identity development may change over time in our collective and how to protect the identities of those possibly implicated in our stories and social action movements.

Our fifth important insight is that CAE and art-making opened up the theme of isolation, revealing intersections of self-censorship and of the isolating experience of a child coming out as gender diverse. In the first instance, we censor ourselves as mothers professionally, as if our experiences of advocating for trans youth engender protection and hypervigilance of our children. We found that friendships and allegiances change to the extent that we censor who we share with and how we bring this challenge into our research. In the second case, we foreground our privileged places as academic researchers and put behind us our own experienced oppressions and needs. Here, visibility became a key concept: we either invisibilize ourselves as parents/advocates of trans kids or we hyper-visibility ourselves as advocates in order to protect the very children for whom we advocate. In each instance, our own experiences and needs are pushed to the background. The self-abnegating and care-focussed practices of advocacy opened onto the intersecting themes of the gendered nature of care work, the invisibilization of parenting, and the isolation of advocacy work from our professional lives and the trans affirming groups (primarily focussed on adults) around us. Together we recognized that risk-taking in our personal and professional lives, concerns about publicness, and the ongoing experience of urgency are key features of the parent/advocate engagement in fighting for the rights and wellbeing of trans and gender diverse youth.

DISCUSSION

CAE as a method brought us to the aforementioned findings by promoting space to be informed by one’s life experiences and as a collective, exploring researcher subjectivity through continuous reflexivity. Collaboration facilitated a pooling of resources, interdisciplinary insights, and access to a wider range of data sources (team members experiences) that were then collected through our two meetings and ongoing conversations. In this way, the interdisciplinary nature of our team was an asset as

we engage in knowledge construction, mobilization, and dissemination. We are also critically aware of how CAE as a methodology could not render visible the stories and knowledge outside of the social location of our group members.

CAE opened space for our team to intentionally include personal and historical narratives, as both researcher and participant (Chang et al., 2012). However, the vulnerability of showing oneself in autoethnography (Lorde, 1984) is contrary to the traditional research ethos of participant confidentiality inherent in our inquiry. With this in mind collaborative autoethnography made way for us as researcher-participants to share ideas, generate new research, refine identities (Moore et al., 2013), and privilege our stories, parents of gender diverse kids, and advocate allies all as authentic sources of data (Shay & Wickes, 2017). CAE helped us to push the boundaries of traditional epistemologies by placing value on interpreting the self as an artefact, whose experience and voice is but a creation and a reckoning of the spaces in which we reside.

Meaning-making was captured through our researcher-participant co-collaborator stories to render visible the assumptions and/or events critical to the phenomena of parental advocacy with and for gender creative trans children and youth. This phenomenon has been previously skimmed over by the autoethnographic lens. In our context this revealed the stress, urgency, and labour inherent within our simultaneously shared and nuanced forms of parental advocacy.

Researcher-participant commitment to the vulnerability required in CAE allowed for deep probing and interrogation, permitting connection to wider issues such as guilt, isolation, self-negation, and the dialectic of hyper-visible/invisible parental advocate coalitional identities. This vulnerability in the research process fostered trust when researching complex and sensitive topics such as ours. Through the process of interrogation and probing these private communal stories were analysed so that great care has gone into protecting the confidentiality of the researchers themselves but also those implicated in the stories (Chang et al., 2012). Notably the influence of hyper-visibility and invisibility melded into ongoing conversation, which extended far beyond the researchers themselves often centring those implicit to and implicated by our stories.

In our team of feminist scholars, doing arts-based research matters most at the level of methodological innovation. It is experiential and experimental (Finley, 2003), which is appropriate and relevant to research that is unprecedented and that is unrecognized. Recognizing the

significant limitations of traditional spoken language, arts-based research permitted us to explore how diverse voices and narratives can emerge through creative inquiry. Mobilizing artforms to showcase diversity in thought, language, and worldview was a way of encouraging aesthetic expression as a tool for social and institutional change.

The reporting of our work is timely as growing bodies of scholarship shows that researchers working with trans and gender non-conforming communities are using a variety of arts-based methods, including educational participative arts workshops (Rooke, 2010), photovoice (Holtby et al., 2015; Hussey, 2006), collaborative photography (Davidmann, 2014), video (Rhoades, 2012; Taylor & Bryson, 2016), as well as community discussions about art (Marshall et al., 2014). These all grapple with matters of embodiment, disability, intimacy, and resilience. Given the limitations of many research projects to effect meaningful change in the lives of trans people, particularly trans women (Namaste, 2000, 2009), doing arts-based research with trans communities is a way to distribute power relations between researchers and participants (Furman et al., 2019). Our bold engagement with arts-based methods as academics, parents, advocates, and allies of trans children and youth work to disrupt disciplinary power through the use of feminist methodologies and the promotion of collaborative identities. Further, mobilizing knowledge through art can be beneficial to trans communities because it encourages an interrogation of power and subjectivity on accessible, creative, and therapeutic terms (Zappa, 2017).

Some scholars suggest that arts-based methods can be particularly useful to explore issues of advocacy and resilience among trans communities (Asakura et al., 2019). We situated our inquiry outside the pathological violence of clinical literature by using arts-based research to encourage new ways of understanding axes of difference (Addison, 2005; Barbee, 2002; McNiff, 1998) through expressive communication as parent advocates.

In the context of our research, the combination of CAE and arts-based research employs abductive reasoning, making a probable conclusion from what one knows, to open the often surprising observations about the experience of advocating for trans youth that do not fit into the schemes by which we usually consider it. We approached the CAE and arts-based workshops with agenda and themes that demanded consideration in light of recent research; we left these workshops with surprising realizations

about what counts as advocacy, the embodied, phenomenological effects of advocacy, and the social or inter-subjective role of advocacy work in our lives, professional and personal.

CONCLUSIONS

The combination of arts-based and CAE is a powerful feminist research methodology that allows participant-researchers to grapple with the subjective realities of one another. Participant-researchers can also develop stronger ties between them, which may contribute to their feeling of personal and collective empowerment. Applied to parents of trans children and youth, who are often experiencing social isolation and discrimination in their advocacy, it offers a powerful way to document experiences while answer some of their needs towards a greater social justice.

Our story of advocacy and ally-ship with trans and gender diverse children and youth does not end at the production of this research. Rather, we hope it lives on in our appeal for social justice (Bochner & Ellis, 2016b) and makes space for the investigation of intersectionalities, such as race, class, religion, or geography, not captured in this phase of our study.

KEY IDEAS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

1. When engaging with families, it is important for social work practitioners to be aware of the stress, urgency, and intense labour parent advocates of gender diverse and trans children and youth may face.
2. The weight and intensity of the advocacy described by researcher-participants was immense. Social work practitioners can learn from advocacy initiatives that are already taking place thereby validating the skills and knowledge possessed by parent advocates.
3. CAE/Art revealed themes of anonymity, self-negation, guilt about self-care or self-focus, isolation, and invisibility/hyper-visibility, which may act as points of exploration for social work practitioners when engaging with parents of trans or gender diverse children. Importantly, social location may both intersect and mediate these experiences.
4. Social work practitioners can incorporate arts-based methods to enhance relationships and build trust.

5. Social work research that incorporates CAE and arts-based methods with individuals facing stigma and oppression may help build collective and shared understandings of self and social phenomena that may be inhibited or hidden due to societal stigma for both researchers and practitioners.

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