



**Teaching Gender-Just Language in the Era of  
“Divisive Concepts”**

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## Teaching Gender-Just Language in the Era of “Divisive Concepts”

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The past decade has seen a remarkable surge of scholarly work on queer pedagogies in the German language classroom. German instructors and applied linguists alike are increasingly questioning the implicit heteronormativity of our teaching methods and materials and incorporating topics such as gender-just language and LGBTQ+ historical and cultural content into our curricula. At the same time, since 2020, so-called “divisive concepts” legislation on the federal, state, and district levels has begun to limit how US educators can address issues of sexism, sexual orientation, and gender identity and expression in their classrooms. Reporting on survey data from K-12 language teachers in US states with enacted and pending divisive concepts legislation, this article aims to give voice to the specific concerns of language teachers in educational environments that are increasingly hostile for LGBTQ+ and allied teachers and students. Addressing the teaching of transgender and gender-non confirming (TGNC) language, in particular, this article will ultimately (re)contextualize research on queer language pedagogies to outline specific evidence-based best practices that instructors of German can use to support their students while adhering to such “divisive concepts” legislation.

### 1. Introduction: The Phantasm of Gender in Language Teaching

Although gender is often unjustly caricatured as a made-up thing, an artifice, fake news, a lie, something crafted in language and living only there, it is the right-wing critics who seem profoundly to fear the power of language. (Butler 2024: 14)

In Judith Butler’s 2024 book *Who’s Afraid of Gender?*, they demonstrate how, for the anti-gender ideology movement, gender has become a “phantasm” – a seemingly singular concept which nevertheless collects and mobilizes a variety of “anxieties, fears, and hatreds,” not the least of which is the fear of the power and potential of language (36). From the terminologies we use to describe gender and sexuality to the pronouns and morphological forms we use to perform gendered identities, the power of language to encode, enact, and express gendered positionalities and possibilities has become a conspicuously public and transnational matter of debate in the past decade. As language

teachers, we are at a precipice of mounting social, legal, and moral pressure to justify our teaching practices as they concern the role of gender and language in our profession. Indeed, language teaching is an explicit target of the anti-gender ideology movement. In January of 2024, Iowa Republican representative Bill Gustoff introduced House File 2060, which proposed modifying legislation on the teaching of world languages in grades nine through twelve by “prohibiting the incorporation of gender-neutral language when the language being taught utilizes a grammatical gender system.”<sup>1</sup> The Bill was recommended for passage by the Iowa House Committee on Education but was not high enough priority to be brought by House leaders to the full chamber. While the bill is thus “dead,” it has the potential to be revived through various legislative mechanisms, and more importantly, sets a precedent for future legislation, in Iowa and beyond, to target world language teaching as a particular domain of gender policing.

Politicized attacks on gender-just language in schools are not unique to Iowa, nor to the United States. In Brazil, a single 2015 Facebook post with a photo of a public-school exam containing the gender-neutral form *alunxs* ‘students’ sparked a national media debate concerning the use of “unorthodox” gender-just language practices in schools (Borba 2019). These debates reflected the discourses of the Non-Partisan School Movement (*Escola sem Partido*), whose supporters decried what they saw as “Marxist ideology” in schools, arguing that “teachers have too much power to ‘indoctrinate’ their students through the inculcation of so-called *gender-ideology*” (Borba 2019: 424). Against this backdrop, Brazilian scholars have drawn attention to the importance of language teaching as a site of resistance, where teachers can foster students’ critical awareness of gender identity as it manifests in the social power of language (De Jesus 2020). Likewise, in Germany, schools are a major locus of legislation seeking to ban gender-just forms which use special characters and punctuation in the states of Bavaria, Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt, and Schleswig-Holstein. A poster for the far-right populist Alternative for Germany (AfD, *Alternative für Deutschland*) explicitly puts teachers in the hot seat, proclaiming “TEACHERS WANT TO ACCEPT THE GENDER STAR”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Iowa, General Assembly, House. <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ba=HF2060>. 90<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, House File 2060, Introduced 18<sup>th</sup> January 2024.

<sup>2</sup> The gender star (*Gendersternchen*; *Sternchen* for short) refers to the insertion of an asterisk between the stem and feminine suffix of a plural noun, indicating reference to gender-diverse, female, and male referents.

Gender-foolishness has reached the schools. No one cares about the real problems. Goodbye, educational achievement” (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**



(AfD Berlin 2018)

Teachers are at the center of the anti-gender ideology movement’s discourses in Brazil, Germany, the US, and beyond. However, these discourses differ as to whether teachers are the victims or perpetrators of gender ideology. While teachers are clearly seen to be at fault for propagating gender-just language in the German example above, Gustoff’s justification for proposing Iowa House Bill 2060 relied heavily on the alleged testimony of “at least two teachers.” Gustoff claimed to have been contacted by teachers whose administrations insisted that they use gender-neutral language in world language classrooms, one of whom was allegedly threatened with discipline (Obradovitch 2024). These contradictory discourses, Butler argues, “...abound in the anti-gender ideology movement, and the more their incoherent and contradictory forms circulate, the more powerful they become” (2004: 43). And yet, they argue that the anti-gender ideology movement cannot be opposed by rational argumentation against such contradiction, since its proponents simply “do not hold themselves to standards of consistency or coherence” (2024: 27). Instead, Butler argues that resistance to anti-gender ideology must “not just reveal the falsehood, but deflate the power of the phantasm to circulate and convince” (2024: 11), in part by asking the question “what kind of phantasm has gender become, and what anxieties, fears, and hatreds does it collect and mobilize?” (2024: 36).

It is exactly this line of inquiry which inspires the core research question of this study: what anxieties, fears, and hatreds are collected and mobilized within German teachers' discourses around trans-affirming and gender-non-conforming (TGNC) language teaching? I answer this question by outlining the major types of legislation relevant to the divisive concepts in education settings that might be expected to affect language teachers and considering the voices of language teachers, and German teachers, in particular, who completed a survey about their experiences with and attitudes toward teaching TGNC language. Bringing together previous research on queer pedagogy in the German classroom with an understanding of the anxieties, fears, and hatreds embedded in these discourses surrounding teaching TGNC language, I will outline best practices for queer pedagogy in the German classroom in the age of "divisive concepts."

### **1.1 The Research Context: Transnational Research on Queer Pedagogy in Language Teaching**

Research on queer pedagogies in language teaching in the anglophone world is not new. In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), an outpouring of literature in the 1990s provided language teachers with strategies for resisting homophobia and supporting LGBTQ+ students (Harris 1990; Nelson 1993, 1999; Summerhawk 1998). Much of this early work argued for queer visibility in language teaching and countering stigma against gay and lesbian teachers and students through representation. Teachers were encouraged to promote students' critical awareness of queerness by emphasizing the role of language in cultural and discursive practices, including queer content in teaching materials, and being transparent about their own queer identities in their professional life.

The past decade has seen a significant increase in attention to queer issues in linguistics and applied linguistics in the United States, particularly as it applies to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ identities beyond lesbian and gay. In 2021, The Linguistics Society of America issued a statement against linguistic misgendering, emphasizing the power of language to do harm against transgender and non-binary people, with accompanying guidelines for avoiding misgendering in professional communications in all languages. Likewise, contemporary research in linguistics and language studies calls not only for the visibility and inclusion of transgender voices but outlines the reasons that transgender people have been excluded from professional linguistics and language studies,

including, for example, the weaponization of pluralistic and descriptive grammatical approaches to language to advocate for the right to misgender and otherwise do harm through language (Zimman 2021).

This trend is also reflected in anglophone literature that specifically concerns the language teaching in the US. Applied linguistic research has sought to center transgender and non-binary linguacultures in language teaching (Baros 2019, Diaz et al. 2022, Knisely & Paiz 2021, Knisely 2023), give voice to the lived experiences of transgender and non-binary students in the language classroom (Baros 2022, Provitola 2019, Spiegelman 2022), and deconstruct anecdotal speculations, such as the contestation that gender-neutral language should not be introduced at lower levels and the claim that cis students are resistant to trans linguacultures (Knisely 2024, Preseau et al. 2024). The majority of anglophone literature in this field is concerned with the interrogation of cisnormativity in teaching materials, and with understanding student perspectives through survey and interview methodologies. This study thus complements this body of research by focusing on teacher experiences with and discourse about gender-just language, which are as of yet less well-explored.

For German teaching in the anglophone world, in particular, there are plentiful resources for gender-just teaching available, though many are aimed at students in tertiary education. The textbooks *Grenzenlos Deutsch* and *Impuls Deutsch*, for example, not only gender-diverse characters and queer content, but also gender-just language, including non-binary pronoun options, gender-just nominal forms for referring to mixed gender groups, and explicit metalinguistic interrogation of the concept of “grammatical gender” as it relates to human referents (Abel et al. 2018, Tracksdorf et al. 2019, 2020). Experiential and empirical literature has also explored the development and implementation of these resources (Gallagher 2022, Gallagher et al. 2024, Preseau et al. 2024). Departing from textbooks, other literature on German teaching, specifically, investigates more holistic curricular interventions, including student-centered pedagogies such as drama-based pedagogy for empowering queer students; however, this work is also limited to the university context (Djavadghazaryans 2020, Donohue-Bergeler et al. 2023). My aim in surveying primary and secondary-level German teachers, specifically, is to fill this gap.

The transnational German-language literature on queerness in DaF is somewhat more cautious and, at times, pessimistic about the role of gender-just language in the class-

room than the US and anglophone literature. Recent literature states, for example, that “traditional” resources are far from the inclusion of, e.g., gender-just forms in grammatical tables (Peuschel 2022). While this may be the case for DaZ materials produced for use in German-speaking countries, it is not the case internationally. *Impuls Deutsch*, published originally by the German arm of the publisher Klett, already includes gender-just language in grammar tables and in basic grammar introductions, despite the publisher’s initial resistance (Preseau et al. 2024, Tracksdorf et al. 2019).

Two major empirical studies in DaF research investigate teacher attitudes toward gender-just language, though in the German context, as I will show, this term is often used to refer almost exclusively to gender-diverse reference of plural nouns to refer to mixed gender groups where traditional forms employ a generic masculine. This focus decenters trans linguacultures by elevating such forms, which are often treated primarily as an issue of women’s representation, over linguistic forms which predominately impact trans and non-binary language users (for example, non-binary pronouns). Nonetheless, one of these studies, which investigates the attitudes of pre-service DaZ/DaF teachers, echoes the anglophone literature in finding that teachers have predominately neutral attitudes toward gender-just language, despite a common folk understanding that there is significant resistance (Peuschel & Schmidt 2022). A similar study investigates practicing teachers’ attitudes toward gender-just language, revealing that while teachers’ general attitudes toward such language range from neutral to positive, there is polarization with respect to specific forms of gender-just reference. Teachers found it more urgent to use forms which explicitly included men and women (i.e. avoided the generic masculine while preserving a binary) than to use forms which referenced non-binary or gender diverse individuals (Stark 2021). This tendency is replicated in much of the teaching-methodological Germanophone scholarship itself; when mentioned at all, gendered linguistic forms beyond nominal plurals (pronouns, for example), are not treated as a problem for non-binary and gender-diverse representation, but investigated due to the tendency of teaching materials to select the masculine as a default pronoun or use feminine examples only where they reinforce gendered stereotypes (Kegyes 2022).

Much of this recent Germanophone work, including two of the studies mentioned above, stems from a single edited volume: *Gender\_Vielfalt\_Sexualität(en) im Fach Deutsch als Fremd- und Zweitsprache* (Freese & Vökel 2022). Several contributions in this volume consist of critical content analysis of gender in textbooks and literature, often pointing

to a need for gender-inclusive materials but never citing *Impuls Deutsch* or *Grenzenlos Deutsch*. However, two essays are integrated with the greater international scholarly discourse and give ample space to gender diversity beyond the binary. *Vielfalt sichtbar machen: Sexuelle Lebensweisen im DaF/DaZ-Unterricht* emphasizes the importance of representing diversity of sexual identity in the classroom (Baar 2022). *Queering DaF/DaZ – queersensible Zugänge für den Sprachunterricht* complements this call with practical suggestions for enacting such representation. While many of these interventions are drawn from the anglophone literature and are applicable generally to the teaching of any subject (e.g. avoiding exclusively male or female student groups and using language that reflects the linguacultures of queer communities), some suggestions are more specific to the German DaF/DaZ context (for example, the recommended use of Hamburger *Sie* – first names with formal second-person pronouns – in place of traditional binary formal address such as *Frau/Herr*) (Vökel 2022: 92).

The only study, to my knowledge, to evaluate a classroom intervention introducing gender-just German language in a university DaF classroom outside of the US, describes lessons developed for advanced students in Italy which aimed to improve their active and passive knowledge of gender-just nominal personal reference, as well as their general awareness of (*Sensibilisierung*) and ability to reflect on (*Reflexion*) the topic. While the intervention was judged to have had mixed results with respect to the former goal, the author considers the intervention successful in its latter goal insofar as students were observed to consciously employ or *reject* gender-just language later in the course (Link 2023, 51). Such a conclusion is in stark contrast to the statement of the Linguistic Society of America, which condemns misgendering as a form of linguistic violence. This implicit sanctioning of gender-unjust ideology belies a general ambivalence for the autonomy of transgender and gender-nonconforming language learners in DaF literature circulating outside of United States, which this article aims to counter.

## 1.2 The Legislative Contexts: Iowa and Ohio

It is not the goal of this article to give a full account of the state of divisive concepts legislation in Ohio and Iowa. However, a basic sketch of the legal situation as it relates to gender identity and sexuality in both states in the spring of 2024 – at the time survey data for this study was collected – will provide context for teachers survey data, providing a basis for the best practices this article will recommend. It will also account



for the similarities and differences in the ways teachers responded in a state with widespread enactment of divisive concepts legislation (Iowa) versus a myriad of proposed and pending measures (Ohio). “Divisive concepts” is an umbrella term that refers most often to the concepts of race and gender, but also to ethnicity, religion, national origin, and other concepts. While this article focuses specifically on divisive concepts legislation as it relates to gender identity and sexuality, the consequences of such legislation for race and ethnicity in language teaching, specifically, is clearly deserving of its own research.

In Iowa, two major enacted laws, House File 802 (effective as of July 1, 2021)<sup>3</sup> and Senate File 496 (signed May 26, 2023)<sup>4</sup> impact teachers’ ability to address gender and sexuality in their classrooms. House File 802 prohibits K-12 and higher education educators from “teaching, advocating, instructing, or training” students or employees about certain divisive concepts. The targeted concepts include “race and sex scapegoating (stating that someone is racist or sexist on account of their race or sex or responsible for the historical actions of their race and sex), and a grab bag of other specific concepts” (Beaty 2024: 140, Iowa, General Assembly, House). Senate File 496 amended Iowa law to create a range of restrictions surrounding gender identity and sexuality in materials and instruction. The most controversial of these are perhaps the library material provision, which bans visual and written depictions of sex acts in school library books, the prohibition on instruction related to sexual orientation and gender identity in Kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade, and the parental notification provision, which requires that teachers notify parents whose students request gender identity related accommodations (for example, the use of a name or pronoun that differs from official records) (Iowa, General Assembly, Senate).

The recommendations provided by the National Education Association (NEA) for Iowa teachers paint a clear picture of the implications of these laws for teachers. Iowa teachers are encouraged to consult their administrators and/or union before, for example, hanging Pride flags in their classroom (National Education Association 2023). Books which districts have removed from libraries include popular children’s and young adult titles such as *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe, *Families, Families, Families!*

<sup>3</sup> Iowa, General Assembly, House. <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ba=HF802&ga=89>. 89<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, House File 802, Signed by Governor 8<sup>th</sup> of June 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Iowa, General Assembly, Senate. <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=90&ba=SF496>. 90<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, Senate File 496, Signed by Governor 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2023.

by Suzanne Lang, and *This Book is Gay* by Juno Dawson. In many cases, the reasons cited for removing books did not involve depictions of sex acts, but rather the mere inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters (e.g. “features a lesbian couple,” “main character is transgender”) (Annie’s Foundation 2023). In Iowa and other states with such legislation, research shows that teachers experience a workplace climate of fear, perceiving that such restrictions “negatively affected their work conditions,” causing them to worry “about the consequences of such limitations for student learning” (Woo et al. 2023, 2).

In Ohio, by contrast, significant divisive concepts legislation has been proposed, but not yet enacted. Senate Bill 83 (introduced May 13, 2023)<sup>5</sup>, for example, proposes similar restrictions to Iowa House Bill 802, but applies only to higher education and has not yet passed out of the House (Ohio, General Assembly, Senate). Similarly, the Ohio State Board of Education passed a resolution expressing opposition to the federal government’s proposed protections for LGBTQ+ students; this included language intended to “affirm parental rights,” echoing Iowa Senate File 496. Unlike the Iowa Senate File, however, the resolution does not specify actual measures that schools must take.<sup>6</sup> State legislation alone does not, of course, show the whole picture. County, city, district, and school-level policies also restrict the teaching of gender identity and sexuality in the US, and the policies of private schools, specifically, merits another study altogether. However, the aim of this section is to provide context for the state-specific situations of the participants in this study. While Iowa teachers are subject to explicit, detailed restrictions and limitations, Ohio teachers are not yet teaching under the same intensity of legislative mandates.

## 2. Methodology

This study employed a survey of language teachers (n=51) to investigate teacher experiences with and attitudes toward gender-just language teaching in states impacted by divisive concepts legislation (see survey in appendix). This article reports on the specific experience of the subsample consisting of participants who teach German (n=5); data provided by teachers of other languages serves to contextualize this data where relevant. A Qualtrics survey was disseminated via Listservs and social media

<sup>5</sup> Ohio, General Assembly, Senate. <https://www.ohiosenate.gov/legislation/135/sb83>. 135<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, Senate Bill 83, Introduced 14<sup>th</sup> of March, 2023.

<sup>6</sup> Ohio, State Board of Education. <https://education.ohio.gov/getattachment/State-Board/State-Board-Reports-and-Policies/24-Resolution.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US>. Resolution 24, Passed 14<sup>th</sup> of December 2022.

relevant to teachers of language in Iowa and Ohio in the late spring and early summer of 2024. To be eligible for inclusion in the study, respondents were required to have taught French, German, Russian or Spanish since August 2020 in the states of Iowa or Ohio at the K-12 level. 51 respondents met these screening criteria and consented to participating. Of these teachers, five indicated that they taught German (two in Iowa and three in Ohio); two of these teachers indicated that they also taught French, but chose German as their focus language for the survey. Respondents in the German subsample taught a wide range of levels, spanning the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grades (students of approximately 8-18 years of age).

## 2.1 Survey Design

After completing the consent form, participants provided demographic information on what languages they had taught, at what level, and in which state(s). Participants who reported having taught multiple languages were asked to select one language to reflect on for the remainder of the survey. They were then presented with a screen presenting them with the following definition of the term “TGNC language”:

The following questions will ask you to reflect on your experiences with TGNC language (transgender and gender non-conforming language). TGNC language is any language that includes and affirms the existence of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. This includes, but is not limited to, the following:

- Non-binary pronouns (for example, English *they/them*, French *iel*, German *xier*, Russian *они*, Spanish *elle*)
- Language that is inclusive of non-heterosexual romantic relationships (for example, English *partner* in place of *girlfriend/boyfriend*)
- Language referring to gender-mixed groups of people which avoids the masculine default (for example, English *chairperson* instead of *chairman*)

After confirming that they understood this definition, participants were directed to the quantitative portion of the survey, which consisted of the following six statements concerning transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) language that participants were asked to rank on a 7-point Likert scale, where 1=strongly disagree and 7=strongly agree:

**Quant 1:** TGNC language should be included in the curricula for the language I teach. **Quant 2:** I include TGNC language in my classes. **Quant 3:** There are materials available for teaching TGNC language for my target language. **Quant 4:** My administration supports me in teaching TGNC language. **Quant 5:** I have the knowledge to teach TGNC language in my target language. **Quant 6:** My students want TGNC language to be incorporated in my classes.

Participants were then directed to the qualitative portion of the survey, which elicited open-ended answers to the following five prompts:

**Qual 1:** Please briefly list some of the ways that you incorporate TGNC language in your classes. **Qual 2:** Please describe some of the barriers you have encountered to teaching TGNC language in your classes. **Qual 3:** Have school or district policies or state legislation concerning the incorporation of LGBTQIA+ content changed your approach to TGNC language in your classes? If so, please briefly describe how. **Qual 4:** What materials or resources do you currently use in your classes which include TGNC language? **Qual 5:** Imagine a resource existed which provided intermediate-low (CEFR A2) high school students for your target language with an introduction to TGNC language. What would you want it to include?

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Iowa State University’s institutional review board. Participants were not required to answer any question, and any potentially identifying information that participants disclosed about themselves, their students, or their administration or institutional setting was redacted from the data. Participants were not compensated for their participation but were given the option to provide their email address to receive follow-up information about the study results and to be contacted for possible follow-up interviews.

## 2.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative portion of the data was analyzed using the discourse analytic methods of versus coding and emotion coding. Following the procedures for versus coding outlined by Saldaña, open-ended responses were tagged in versus coding for “moieties,” or expressions of binary, asymmetrical power relations between entities, for example, teachers vs. administration (2013, 93-97). Emotion coding was then used to identify participant emotions associated with these moieties (2013, 86-89). These two types of coding were selected for this study not only because they allow for close analysis of a small “case study”-size sample, but because such so-called “affective” methods of discourse analysis reveal the ways that language expresses the “anxieties, fears, and hatreds” collected within the phantasm of gender which this study aims to uncover (Butler 2024, 36).

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Quantitative Analysis

In the quantitative portion of the survey, participants ranked statements about TGNC language on a Likert scale from 1 (=strongly disagree) to 7 (=strongly agree). The mean

response for each statement is shown below in Table 1 for both the full sample of teachers of French, German, Russian, and Spanish and the subsample of German teachers only. Standard deviations are given in parenthesis under the mean.

	<b>German Subsample (n=5)</b>	<b>Full Sample (n=51)</b>
<b>Quant 1:</b> <i>TGNC language should be included in the curricula for the language I teach.</i>	6 (1.41)	5.44 (1.61)
<b>Quant 2:</b> <i>I include TGNC language in my classes.</i>	5.75 (0.50)	4.91 (1.66)
<b>Quant 3:</b> <i>There are materials available for teaching TGNC language for my target language.</i>	6.25 (0.58)	3.95 (2.17)
<b>Quant 4:</b> <i>My administration supports me in teaching TGNC language.</i>	5.5 (1.29)	4.12 (1.8)
<b>Quant 5:</b> <i>I have the knowledge to teach TGNC language in my target language.</i>	6 (1.15)	4.81 (1.52)
<b>Quant 6:</b> <i>My students want TGNC language to be incorporated in my classes.</i>	6 (1.41)	4.81 (1.68)

Table 1: Teacher concurrence with statements about TGNC language, on a scale from 1(=strongly disagree) to 7(=strongly agree)

German teachers responded more positively to every statement than the teachers in the full sample. German teachers gave all six statements an average numerical value corresponding to “agree” or higher, indicating that, at least in this small sample of teachers of German in Iowa and Ohio teachers believe TGNC language should be taught, do so themselves, and believe that their students want TGNC language to be taught. Furthermore, they feel they have the knowledge and resources to teach TGNC language. While this is also the case for the full sample, the numbers are appreciably higher for teachers of German.

The most notable quantitative discrepancy between German teachers and the full sample is that German teachers are significantly more likely to agree that there are materials available for teaching TGNC language in their target language. This again suggests that the claims in recent DaF literature that materials do not yet exist are, at best, specific to DaF within the German-speaking world. Despite German teachers’ support of TGNC language and their relative satisfaction with their own knowledge and the materials available to them, their lowest ranked statement is the same as for the full sample.

Namely, there is less agreement that their administrations support them in teaching TGNC language. A closer look at the qualitative data will elucidate the reasons for this, and, correspondingly, the fears, anxieties, and hatreds embedded within these institutional contexts.

### 3.2 Qualitative Analysis

While each open-ended qualitative prompt asked for specific information relating to TGNC language, the goal was not so much to elicit factual information so much as to ask questions that encouraged participants to reveal oppositions and emotions underlying teacher discourses about TGNC language. The answers to all prompts resulted in a subcorpus of German teachers’ responses, which underwent versus coding, yielding the following moieties, or oppositional concepts and entities, underlying German teachers’ discourse surrounding the teaching of TGNC language, listed by frequency of tag from most to least frequent:

TEACHERS VS. ADMINISTRATION/SCHOOLS (x4)  
 TEACHERS VS. STUDENTS (x2)  
 TEACHERS VS. PARENTS (x2)  
 ANTI-DISCRIMINATION POLICIES VS. ANTI-LGBTQ+ POLICIES (x2)  
 COMMUNITY VS. LEGISLATION (x1)  
 TEACHERS VS. COLLEAGUES (x1)  
 TEACHERS VS. LEGISLATION (x1)  
 TEACHERS VS. MATERIALS (x1)

The subcorpus was subsequently tagged using emotions coding following Saldaña (2013: 86-89). Where versus coding yielded a moiety, the relevant passages were further tagged for words that made explicit reference to emotions (e.g., *afraid*) and passages where the researcher identified and tagged an underlying emotion (e.g. “my administration might question me” – afraid). These emotions were grouped into macro-categories, yielding the most frequent emotions of AMBITION, CARE, FEAR; where relevant, the emotions associated with the moieties elucidates their impact on teachers.

Given the quantitative evidence that teachers advocated for the teaching of TGNC language, most moieties involved teachers as supporters of TGNC language vs. other entities as opponents of TGNC language. The most frequently mentioned opposition was TEACHERS VS. ADMINISTRATION/SCHOOLS. Teachers from both Iowa and Ohio reported that their teaching of TGNC language was subject to institutional constraints. This opposition was also most strongly associated with the emotion FEAR. FEAR was

associated with all three of the most frequent oppositions; as one participant stated, “I may worry about facing backlash or negative reactions from students, parents, or administrators for addressing TGNC topics in class.” It is notable that participants from both states did not, however, associate FEAR with laws themselves. In fact, only two participants, both from Ohio, the state with fewer legislative restrictions, mentioned legal resistance above the district level at all. These instances co-occurred with the AMBITION tag; teachers cited legislation as a motivation to educate parents and community and to seek new teaching methods. This suggests that while state laws have been the primary subject of attention for LGBTQ+ advocacy, it is the district and school-level reaction to the legal climate that is most negatively impactful for teachers.

In agreement with the quantitative data, only one teacher mentioned materials in opposition to their desire to teach TGNC language, indicating no deficit in informational and explanatory resources, but a lack of classroom exercises which incorporated TGNC language. Notably, this participant was the only elementary school German teacher; it can be inferred that resources are not as plentiful at this level. The final opposition involving teachers, TEACHERS VS. COLLEAGUES, suggests a need for further research. As discussed, much literature has already debunked student resistance; however, in both this study and in my anecdotal experience, teachers express fear that students will experience backlash from other teachers if they continue to use TGNC language in future classes with their colleagues. Further research is needed to ascertain the extent to which this is true, and, if so, how students can be equipped to respond to this particular form of resistance.

The two oppositions that did not involve teachers were ANTI-DISCRIMINATION POLICIES VS. ANTI-LGBTQ+ POLICIES AND COMMUNITY VS. LEGISLATION. The former contradicts an implicit assumption of this study, which is that teachers are mainly impacted by policies restricting the teaching of LGBTQ+ topics in the US. However, less attention has been paid to the fact that both states and districts are simultaneously implementing policies that teachers can harness in defense of teaching TGNC language. This is an avenue for supporting teachers that should be further explored. The latter opposition, community vs. legislation, similarly suggests an important point of resistance which this study did not consider. Namely, one participant says that they feel it is not their job only to educate students, but also students’ parents and the community. This is particularly important in the wake of parental notification laws; anti-LGTBQ+ legislation that

frames LGBTQ+ content in schools as a matter of parental choice loses its power if parents do not object to the content.

Finally, the emotion care emerged frequently where there was no discussion of moiety, but rather expression of solidarity between teachers and students or teachers and LGBTQ+ community. German teachers’ desire to teach TGNC language was never described in terms of wanting to deliver authentic content or to guide students to weigh the grammatical pros and cons of gender-just language, but rather in terms of a desire to, for example, “encourage respect and understanding among all students,” “foster a culture of inclusivity and acceptance,” “create a safe and supportive environment,” “promote respect and inclusion,” and “[create] a safer and more affirming environment for TGNC students.” These teacher motivations call for researchers and educators to reconsider the goals and expected outcomes of teaching gender-inclusive language, reframing gender-just language teaching as a site of care and support rather than as a grammatical problem; this principle will inform the best practices presented in the subsequent section.

#### **4. Discussion: Best Practices**

Bringing together previous research on queer approaches to language teaching with the results of this study and with more general advice for educators working under divisive concepts policies issued by Iowa Safe Schools (2023), this section presents three best practices for supporting LGBTQ+ students in K-12 German classrooms subject to divisive concepts legislation. The guiding principle behind each concept is the acknowledgement that divisive concepts legislation is intentionally vague and ever-changing; the goal of its proponents is to instill a culture of fear among educators and students, fueling the phantasm of gender (Butler 2024: 14). While the implementation of each practice may vary across legislative context and language level, it follows that the goal of each of these practices as forms of resistance must be to prevent this fear from taking root.

- 1. Turn to Inquiry-Based Approaches:** While book bans are common in divisive concepts legislation, these bans apply to school library books, and not to the books and other forms of information that students can access in the world and online. Divisive concepts legislation often hinges on clauses prohibiting teachers from providing students directly with instruction and materials that include pro-



hibited topics, but, as Iowa Safe Schools details, students may be able to identify and “provide” these materials themselves through inquiry-based approaches (2023). The rich queer histories and topics implicit to the teaching of German language and culture provide fertile ground for inquiry-based pedagogies whereby students can be guided to explore LGBTQ+ topics, including TGNC language, based on their interests. A WebQuest on nearly any topic is, for example, likely to yield source material that includes various forms of gender-inclusive language; asking students to remark on “special uses of punctuation” in the materials they encounter is likely to lead to student-initiated discussions about gender-just language.

2. **Engage Across the Curriculum:** Approaches to TGNC language in German, both in and outside of the pedagogical context, must broaden beyond the “problem” of nominal reference to mixed-gender groups. While this topic is of particular interest because of the grammatical questions it poses, this has led to a focus on the problems rather than the possibilities of gender-just language. Gendered binaries run through all levels of all languages, even those without so-called “grammatical gender,” from honorifics to formulaic stereotypes to metaphors which invoke gender to emphasize opposition. One simple way to deconstruct such metaphor in language teaching is to follow the textbook *Impuls Deutsch* in replacing the terminology *grammatikalisches Geschlecht* or *grammatical gender* with *noun class* or *Genus*, relabeling the noun classes *masculine*, *feminine*, *neuter* as *der*, *die*, *das* words or *r*, *e*, *s* classes. At the K-6 level where there may not yet be explicit grammar instruction, this corresponds with eliminating the gender-based mnemonic devices such as blue/pink color coding used for teaching articles.
3. **Dismantle Harmful Language Ideologies:** Teaching *about* gender-just language is just as important as teaching gender-just forms. Research has demonstrated that the L2 language classroom provides an ideal space to interrupt harmful L1 language ideologies. Naomi Truan’s work shows this specifically with respect to ideologies surrounding gender-inclusive language among L2 German speakers, demonstrating that “progressive language ideologies in the L2 have an influence on language ideologies in the L1”; correspondingly, “after multilinguals have experienced what gender-inclusive language can look like in

their less emotional language, similar language practices are adopted in the L1” (2024: 47). Participants in my study reported doing this by contextualizing gender-inclusive forms in German with conceptual English-language resources about gender and language such as resources produced by GLSEN<sup>7</sup>. Where such materials are targets of divisive concepts legislation, for example in K-6 education in Iowa, educators can teach linguistic variations (dialectal, social, stylistic, and otherwise) to guide students to interrogate standard language ideologies, which have been shown to impact students’ acceptance of gender-inclusive language later in life (Preseau et al. 2024).

## 5. Conclusion

Latent in all of these practices is what might be a fourth, more theoretical best practice: **Focus on Freedoms.** As Butler argues, the anti-intellectual, incoherent, and contradictory nature of the anti-gender-ideology movement means that it cannot be countered by logical argumentation alone. Instead, they underline that “we have to expose the fearmongering that would recast fundamental freedoms as harms, and make freedom into a new and vital object of desire” (2020: 260). By framing language as a place of infinite possibility for gender expression, and the issue of gender-just language as personal freedom for trans and non-binary language users, teachers can avoid further fueling the phantasm of gender which fears the power of language and seeks to contain it. This is particularly the case with respect to gender-just language in the German context, where even proponents of gender-justice are often caught up in debates concerned primarily with debating the grammatically “best” forms rather than with the lives and freedoms of queer language users, and where teaching students to understand the grammatical pros and cons of various forms of gendered address has been the primary focus of most pedagogical intervention.

As the Linguistic Society of America’s statement against misgendering emphasizes:

one’s own grammatical restrictions do not excuse misgendering... Languages with gender agreement that genders the speaker, addressee, or third persons should be treated similarly to any other gendering language: namely, using inappropriate gender agreement

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<sup>7</sup> GLSEN, formerly the Gay and Lesbian Independent School Teachers Network, is an LGBTQ+ advocacy group serving K-12 teachers and students in the US; students with higher German proficiency might access the materials of German counterpart organizations such as Schule der Vielfalt.

or morphology can constitute misgendering, and can disproportionately harm and alienate transgender, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming people. (2021)

Teachers of German have a unique opportunity to bring such transnational perspectives on gender-just language to our teaching, and to thereby influence the direction of language change towards gender-justice in the German-speaking world.

This study suggests that a significant challenge for some German teachers in the United States in incorporating TGNC language in their classes may not primarily be their own resistance or lack of knowledge, nor a lack of materials or student interest. Instead, it is a fear of local-level backlash, whether state-sanctioned or not, that runs as a common thread through teachers' discourse. From this emerges, however, a competing discourse of care—a desire to protect their students from this same antagonism. Future work on gender-just language in DaF must move beyond simply asking what gender-just forms we should teach and how we should teach them to ask the question teachers are already asking: what does a transnational pedagogy of care for LGBTQ+ students look like, and how can it exist under the phantasm of gender which threatens its enactment?

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### Biographical information

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### Keywords

divisive concepts, DaF, gender-just language, language ideologies, language policy, transgender and gender non-conforming language

## Appendix: Survey

### Teacher Perspectives: Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Language in the World Language Classroom

#### Start of Block: Screening Questions

Screening 1 Have you taught a World Languages class in French, German, Russian, or Spanish at a public or private K-12 institution in Ohio or Iowa since August 2020?

☐ Yes (1)

☐ No (2)

#### Start of Block: Demographics

Demographic 1 Which World Language(s) have you taught in K-12 settings?

☐

French (1)

☐

German (2)

☐

Russian (4)

☐

Spanish (5)

☐

Other (please list) (6)

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Demographic 2 In which state(s) have you taught since August 2020?

☐

Ohio (1)

☐

Iowa (2)

☐

Other (please list) (3)

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Demographic 3 At which grade levels have you taught since August 2020? (Please check all that apply; for example, if you teach an AP course that enrolls students at multiple grade levels, please check all relevant levels)

- ☐ Kindergarten (1)
- ☐ 1st Grade (2)
- ☐ 2nd Grade (3)
- ☐ 3rd Grade (4)
- ☐ 4th Grade (5)
- ☐ 5th Grade (6)
- ☐ 6th Grade (7)
- ☐ 7th Grade (8)
- ☐ 8th Grade (9)
- ☐ 9th Grade (10)
- ☐ 10th Grade (11)
- ☐ 11th Grade (12)
- ☐ 12th Grade (13)

Demographic 4 If you teach multiple languages, please choose one language to reflect on for the remainder of this survey.

- ☐ French (1)
- ☐ German (2)
- ☐ Russian (3)
- ☐ Spanish (4)

End of Block: Demographics



## Start of Block: Informational Block

**Info Block** The following questions will ask you to reflect on your experiences with **TGNC language** (transgender and gender non-conforming language). TGNC language is any language that includes and affirms the existence of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. This includes, but is not limited to, the following:







- Non-binary pronouns (for example, English *they/them*, French *iel*, German *xier*, Russian *они*, Spanish *elle*)
- Language that is inclusive of non-heterosexual romantic relationships (for example, English *partner* in place of *girlfriend/boyfriend*)
- Language referring to gender-mixed groups of people which avoids the masculine default (for example, English *chairperson* instead of *chairman*)

☐ Got it! (1)

## End of Block: Informational Block

## Start of Block: Likert Scale

**Likert 1** TGNC language is any language that includes and affirms the existence of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. Please rate your level of agreement with each of the following statements about TGNC language on a 7-point scale, where 1 means “strongly disagree” and 7 means “strongly agree.”

	Strongly disagree						Strongly agree
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
TGNC language should be included the curricula for the language I teach. ( )							
I include TGNC language in my classes. ( )							
There are materials available for teaching TGNC language for my target language. ( )							
My administration supports me in teaching TGNC language. ( )							
I have the knowledge to teach TGNC language in my target language. ( )							
My students want TGNC language to be incorporated in my classes. ( )							

## End of Block: Likert Scale

Start of Block: Short Answer 1

Short Answer 1 Please briefly list some of the ways that you incorporate TGNC language in your classes.

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Short Answer 2 Please describe some of the barriers you have encountered to teaching TGNC language in your classes.

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Page Break

Short Answer 3 Have school or district policies or state legislation concerning the incorporation of LGBTQIA+ content changed your approach to TGNC language in your classes? If so, please briefly describe how.

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Short Answer 4 What materials or resources do you currently use in your classes which include TGNC language?

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Short Answer 5 Imagine a resource existed which provided intermediate-low (CEFR A2) high school students for your target language with an introduction to TGNC language. What would you want it to include?

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