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“THE SCHOOL HELPS ME TO UNDERSTAND, NOT REALLY OTHER PEOPLE TO
UNDERSTAND”: ELEMENTARY TRANSGENDER STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES OF
SCHOOL

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Students who identify as transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming navigate multiple messages and realities under the current media and political climate. While transgender individuals are seeing greater representation in popular culture, the political arena, and other areas of power, they are still at higher risks for violence, victimization, and discrimination. Further, there is a growing knowledge of secondary transgender students and their navigation of school, but the research literature has produced little on how their elementary-aged peers experience school in ways that are either similar or different to their older peers. This basic qualitative descriptive study focuses on one mid-Atlantic state (MAS) in a time of transition as a law requiring school divisions to adopt transgender affirming policies went into effect, and sought to answer the following research questions: How do transgender, non-binary, and GNC elementary-aged students experience and navigate “schooling” in the MAS? What do these students reveal as support systems? What do these students identify as barriers? Through interviews of elementary school students and their parents, findings emerged around the active inner life of these students and their personal growth as a result of their experiences, school practices such as ensuring policy implementation with fidelity and considerations for staff training and student curriculum, and the importance of non-school supports such as summer camps and community groups. It is recommended that schools center on believing and incorporating transgender student voices into their decisions, focus on policy implementation and accountability, create non-gendered spaces and practices, develop gender-inclusive curricula, and ensure staff training on gender identity.

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Children, by design deprived of civil rights and infantilized, are easy targets for political violence—just as easily, it turns out, as concerned adults can claim them for protection.

--Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, 2018

What keeps me going is the knowledge that I am not the only transgender student out there, and I have the chance to make things better so other transgender kids do not have to go through what I am going through.

--Gavin Grimm, *Washington Post*, 2016

To Gavin Grimm and the many other G.G. in schools.

You are seen, heard, and valued.

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

Cisgender: An adjective describing a person whose gender identity corresponds with the gender society typically associates with the sex they were assigned at birth (Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

Gender: A set of social, psychological, and emotional traits that classify an individual as typically masculine or feminine, although the social construct of gender may be more diverse across a continuum rather than as a binary system (Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

Gender-expansive/gender-diverse/gender-fluid/gender-nonbinary/agender/gender queer: Terms that convey a wider, more inclusive range of gender identity and/or expression than typically associated with the social construct of a binary (two discrete and opposite categories of male and female) gender system (Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

Gender Expression: The manner in which a person represents or expresses their gender identity or role to others, often through appearance, clothing, hairstyles, behavior, activities, voice, or mannerisms. Gender expression may change over time and from day-to-day and is not necessarily related to the person's gender identity (Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

Gender Identity: A person's internal sense of their own identity as a boy/man, girl/woman, another gender, no gender, or outside the male/female binary. Gender identity is an innate part of a person's identity and can be the same or different from society's expectations with the sex they were assigned at birth (Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

Gender Nonconforming: A person who does not conform to gender stereotypes. Their gender expression differs from society’s expectations associated with the sex assigned at birth. Being gender nonconforming is distinct from being transgender, though some transgender people may consider themselves to be gender nonconforming (Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

Gender Transition: The process of shifting toward living according to their gender identity, rather than the sex assigned at birth. Transitions can be at different levels, including social transition, such as new names, pronouns, appearance, and clothing. Some people may undergo medical transitions, such as hormone therapy or surgery (Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

LGBTQ+: An acronym for “lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and others” (Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

Non-binary: a term used to refer to people whose gender identity is not exclusively male or female, including those who identify with a different gender, a combination of genders, or no gender. Non-binary may be considered a subset of transgender or a distinct identity. Other similar terms may include genderqueer, gender fluid, agender, or Two-Spirit (for Native American Indian, Alaska Native, First Nation, or Indigenous communities) (Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

Pronouns: The pronoun or set of pronouns that a person identifies with and would like to be called when their proper name is not being used. Examples include “she/her/hers,” “he/him/his,” “ze/hir/hirs,” and “they/them/theirs.” Some people prefer no pronouns at all. There has been a shift away from the term “preferred gender pronoun” or “PGP” to using “pronoun.” This change was made because a person’s pronouns are not just preferred; they’re the pronouns that must be used (GLSEN, n.d.).

Sex Assignment: A label, generally “male” or “female,” that is typically assigned at birth on the basis of a cluster of physical and anatomical features. Intersex refers to someone whose combination of chromosomes, gonads, hormones, internal sex organs, and genitals differs from the two expected patterns of male or female (Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

Sexual Orientation: The inner feelings of who a person is attracted to emotionally and/or physically, in relation to their own gender identity. Some people may identify as “asexual,” “bisexual,” “gay,” “lesbian,” “pansexual,” “queer,” “straight,” and many more (GLSEN, 2014).

Transgender: A self-identifying term that describes a person whose gender identity is different from their sex assigned at birth. A **transgender girl** is a girl who was presumed to be male when she was born, and a **transgender boy** is a boy who was presumed to be female when he was born. Note that there is a wide range of gender identities in addition to transgender male and transgender female, such as nonbinary (Virginia Department of Education, 2021).

CHAPTER 1: SHIFTING SANDS

It is almost impossible to engage with current popular media without seeing references to people who identify as transgender. Television shows such as *Pose* (2018) and *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017) feature characters who identify as transgender, non-binary, or both. Actress Laverne Cox, who herself identifies as transgender, regularly engages with the media, using her platform as an opportunity to educate people on the trans experience (CBS News, 2017; Galvan, 2014; McDonough, 2014). In terms of politics, in 2017 Danica Roem was elected as the first openly transgender identifying individual to a U.S. state house, specifically the House of Delegates in the Commonwealth of Virginia. What is particularly noteworthy is that she won against a long-standing anti-LGBTQ incumbent (Olivo, 2017). In 2020, then president-elect Joe Biden specifically named the transgender community in his celebratory remarks following his being named the winner of the U.S. presidential election (Kitchener, 2020). As such, there are more representations of transgender persons within the public sphere than ever before, as well as a greater acknowledgement of support from outside that community. However, this landscape of increased visibility and public standing for some in the transgender community exists in sharp contrast to more negative outcomes for others. HRC reported that 2020 and 2021 were some of the most violent and deadliest years for transgender individuals in the U.S., with 42 and 51 victims shot or murdered, respectively (HRC, 2020, 2021). Moreover, the majority of these acts were committed against Black and Latinx women. Thus, young transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming people are growing up in landscape that conveys multiple messages: the higher profile of trans people and issues on the one hand, and the challenging and potentially deadly lived reality for some on the other.

Nationally, there are some estimates that place the population of transgender, non-binary, and GNC students as somewhere around 0.7 percent of those aged thirteen-to-eighteen years old (Blad, 2017). Other estimates from national research samples indicate that the size of the group is around 1.8% of high-school students, although this particular data set does not include elementary or middle school students (Johns et al., 2019). In a biennial survey of U.S. students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ), Kosciw et al. (2020) found that 86.3% of students in this group “experienced harassment or assault based on personal characteristics, including sexual orientation, [and] gender expression...” (p. xix). In particular, the authors found that transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming (GNC) students “experienced higher levels of victimization [than their cisgender LGB peers] based on their gender expression” (p. 94). In some situations, this can have significant consequences for transgender, non-binary, and GNC students in schools. As reported by Caron (2018), twelve year-old Maddie Crenshaw faced significant harassment not only by peers but by many of the town’s adults based upon her identification as transgender in Achille, Oklahoma. As a result, she and her family no longer felt safe attending the local school. CBS News and the Associated Press (2018) reported that seventeen year-old Ally Steinfeld, a transgender female in Missouri, had her eyes gouged out and genitals stabbed before being killed, dismembered, and burned by her roommates after she came-out as trans in 2017. In other situations, the harassment is named as a potential contributor to suicide. Bever (2018) reported that Jamel Myles, of Denver, Colorado, died by suicide. While Myles identified as gay, his expressions of gender did not conform to standard male norms. After his death, it was revealed that he had been victimized by peers due to his sexual orientation and non-conformity to gender expectations. Myles was only nine years-old and attended a Colorado elementary school. While the cases cited above are on an extreme end

of the spectrum, they serve to highlight that in many schools and communities, transgender, non-binary, and GNC students are often in situations where their day-to-day environment is antagonistic and potentially dangerous to their physical and emotional well-being. Consequently, transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students are not immune to negative outcomes related to their gender identities. Moreover, it leads to questions around how the experiences of transgender students in school, particularly those of younger students, impact their lives in positive and negative ways. In fact, one could surmise that the policies, practices, and supports in schools that are provided to students who identify as transgender, non-binary, or GNC during their formative years could be a matter of life-or-death.

National Landscape

In 2013, the Arcadia Unified School District in California entered into a resolution agreement with the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice (2013) in order to resolve a claim of discrimination based on sex, primarily citing Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (2018). The complaint was brought against the school district by a transgender boy who stated that they were not permitted access to facilities that corresponded to their gender identity either in school or for an overnight field trip, violating their rights under Title IX. In the agreement, the school division was to provide the student with access to facilities and opportunities corresponding to their gender identity, establish a support team for any student who indicated they were transgender or GNC, review and update policies such as nondiscrimination and harassment to be inclusive of gender identity, gender expression and gender non-conformity, and contract with a consultant to support this review and implementation (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Justice, 2013). This agreement was among the first of its kind from the federal government, and quickly became a standard upon which

other state and local policies were based. To that end, the U.S. Department of Education (2014), under the Obama administration, released a document that sought to provide answers to frequently-asked questions pertaining to Title IX. Contained therein was a single response on the question of whether or not Title IX protections applied to students who identified as transgender. This response stated that they were protected and that schools needed to treat these students consistent with their gender identity versus their sex-assigned-at-birth. Later, the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education (2016) provided additional guidance to all schools through a *Dear Colleague Letter* that gave more specifics about the application of Title IX towards transgender students. Here, in addition to non-discrimination protections, they enumerated schools' responsibilities to honor names and pronouns, provide options that aligned to students' gender identities for restrooms, athletics, single-sex classes, and overnight field trips, and also included considerations for the amendment of student and alumni records. It is important to note that this guidance was not based on any explicit language pertaining to transgender students within Title IX itself, but rather the Obama administration's interpretation of the application of the regulation to this group.

It is against this backdrop that a transgender student in Gloucester County, Virginia, Gavin Grimm, filed suit against his school board for denying him access to the restrooms that corresponded to his gender identity. In *G.G. v. Gloucester County School Board* (2015), Gavin Grimm had originally been allowed to use the restroom in the nurse's office once he had asserted his male gender identity to the school. He found this to be discriminatory, though, and wished to use the regular male bathrooms in the school, and began doing so with the permission of the school's principal (Balingit, 2016). However, the school board then enacted a policy that required students to use the restrooms associated with their sex-assigned-at-birth. The claim

asserted that there had been a violation of Grimm's rights under Title IX, specifically discrimination based upon sex, as well as the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment of the United States Constitution, which states that everyone should have access to the same safeguards under the law (Eckes, 2017). Grimm's case moved through the district and appellate courts, culminating in a ruling by the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals that stated that Gavin Grimm had a right to use the male restrooms given the Obama administration's interpretation of Title IX being applicable to transgender students (*G.G. v. Gloucester Cnty. Sch. Bd.*, 2016). As this case was being appealed to the Supreme Court of the United States, the newly sworn-in Trump administration withdrew the Obama administration guidance on the interpretation of Title IX as inclusive of transgender students (Kreighbaum, 2017; U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Given that the Fourth Circuit Court's decision was based upon an administrative interpretation of Title IX regulations, the Supreme Court remanded the case back to the Fourth Circuit for review given the Trump administration's new interpretation (*Gloucester Cty. Sch. Bd. V. G.G.*, 2017). Thus, this case demonstrated the precarious legal standing of transgender and GNC students within the U.S., as there was no definitive and settled federal case law establishing consistent protections and practices for either students or schools (Eckes, 2017). Grimm continued his court challenges even after he had graduated, ultimately winning his case in August of 2020 when the Fourth Circuit stated that Gloucester's bathroom policy was unconstitutional and discriminatory under the Equal Protection Clause as well as the court's own interpretation of Title IX (Finley & Lavoie, 2020). An appeal by the Gloucester County School Board for an en banc hearing, where all of the judges in the Fourth Circuit would review the case versus the standard panel of three, was also denied, cementing the ruling (*Grimm v. Gloucester Cty. Sch. Bd.*, 2020). To this end, in 2021 the Gloucester County School Board was

ordered to pay 1.3 million dollars to cover Grimm's legal costs over the extended years of the case (Natanson, 2021b).

Since the Grimm case, there have been several others that have risen to the appellate court level, each holding jurisdiction over multiple states. In *Whitaker v. Kenosha Unified School District No. 1 Board Of Education* (2017), the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals upheld an injunction that required the school district to allow the transgender male student to use the male restroom facilities, citing not only the potential harm to the student if they did not, but also that the student likely had solid arguments under both Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause for continued litigation. The Supreme Court of the United States chose not to hear the case when it was appealed to them by the school district, effectively upholding the Seventh Circuit's ruling. Similarly, in *Dodds v. United States Department of Education* (2016), the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals chose not to stay an injunction from a lower court that compelled the school district to allow an eleven year-old transgender girl to continue to use the female restroom facilities in the school, again citing the potential harm to the student if she was required to return to using the single-person facility in the nurses' office, as well as the likelihood of the strong merits of her case under Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause. In *Doe v. Boyertown Area School District* (2018), the Third Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the school district's policy allowing transgender students to use the restrooms and locker rooms corresponding to a student's gender identity, claiming that the policy was focused specifically on eliminating discrimination against these students and that the mere presence of a transgender student in a restroom would not be seen as threatening by a reasonable person. The Supreme Court again chose not to hear the case on appeal. More recently, in *Parents for Privacy v. Barr* (2020) the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld an Oregon school district's policy supporting the use of restrooms and locker

rooms that corresponded to students' gender identities, stating that the group of parents challenging the district did not have a case under the Equal Protection Clause, given that the district offered to make accommodations for any family that wished for greater privacy. Nor did they have a case under Title IX, given that there was no demonstration of harassment towards cisgender students under the policy. The Supreme Court again chose not to hear the case upon appeal.

In 2020, the Supreme Court did weigh in on the rights of transgender individuals, although not in relation to schools. In *Bostock v. Clayton Cty.* (2020) the Supreme Court ruled that the firing of employees after they revealed homosexual or transgender identities was in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (2015) as it was considered discrimination based upon sex. Using *Bostock* as a foundation, President Biden issued an *Executive Order* in January of 2021 affirming that discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity was in violation of Title VII and would be enforced (Biden, 2021a). The President then followed this with another *Executive Order* in March of 2021 affirming that schools should be free from discrimination, including that based upon sexual orientation or gender identity (Biden, 2021b). This in effect was a reversal of the Trump administration's reversal of the Obama administration's guidance in support of transgender student rights. Moreover, through a legal review of policies and regulations that fell under the *Bostock* umbrella, the U.S. Department of Education (2021) posted a *Notice of Interpretation* stating that, in effect, since it had been ruled that the Title VII protections against discrimination based upon sex extended to sexual orientation and gender identity, so too did the protections under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (2018).

Thus, at the federal level, the Supreme Court has yet to weigh in directly on the issue of transgender rights within schools, although they have now set precedent through *Bostock* that discrimination based upon sex is inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity. Additionally, through their inaction on school specific cases involving transgender students, they have effectively upheld the decisions of the appellate courts that have asserted the rights of these students. As such, while there are a number of circuit courts with cases that support these students through interpretations of Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause, they do not cover every transgender student in every school within the United States (*Dodds v. United States Dep't of Educ.*, 2016; *Doe v. Boyertown Area Sch. Dist.*, 2018; *Grimm v. Gloucester Cty. Sch. Bd.*, 2020; *Parents for Privacy v. Barr*, 2020; *Whitaker v. Kenosha Unified Sch. Dist. No. 1 Bd. Of Educ.*, 2017). Further, while the current Biden administration has posted *Executive Orders* and *Notices of Interpretation* that state that Title VII and Title IX protect these students, as Eckes (2017) discusses there are inherently challenges in legal arguments based on interpretations of these regulations where transgender students are not explicitly spelled out in the original policy (Biden, 2021a, 2021b; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Without any firm federal law that is explicit about discrimination based upon gender identity in schools or unambiguous universal legal precedent, it is left up to either states or even local school divisions to work within these inconsistently interpreted legal doctrines to attempt to remain on the right side of the law as well as navigate the court of public opinion within their communities.

State Statutes

State laws vary around the country with regards to the inclusion and support of transgender students within schools. Many states have antibullying/harassment laws, with some that include requirements for school divisions to also develop their own antibullying policies

within legislative or regulatory guidelines. However, while these antibullying/harassment policies may include protected categories such as race, ethnicity, religion, or disability, they are not always inclusive of gender identity. Moreover, they also do not address the potential necessity for additional nondiscrimination policies or policies that address the specific needs of transgender students (Transgender Law Center, n.d.). California is one state in which there are state laws as well as direction from the California Department of Education that provides guidance to schools regarding their support of transgender students. This includes requirements regarding antibullying/harassment, nondiscrimination, and additional practices to support all students' asserted gender identities (California Department of Education, 2018; California State Legislature, 2014). A similar set of laws and requirements also exist in New York State through the Dignity for All Students Act of 2012 and accompanying guidance from the department of education, covering everything from records and restrooms to nondiscrimination and inclusive curriculum (New York State Education Department, 2015; Dignity for All Students, 2012).

However, states can also attempt to limit the rights of transgender students, whether it is access to restrooms and locker rooms, athletic participation, or gender-affirming healthcare. In 2017, for the second time, the Tennessee State Legislature introduced a bill that would have limited students to using the restroom that corresponded to their sex-assigned-at-birth as provided in their student records. It ultimately died that year in the state's senate (Bado, 2017; Lowary & Wadhwani, 2017). A bathroom bill did make it through Tennessee's 2019 legislative session, and in its original form again attempted to limit restroom use to sex-assigned-at-birth in public spaces. However, when it went into effect the language regarding gender identity had been removed as it made its way through the legislative process, leaving it as a law focused on public decency within restrooms (Associated Press, 2019; WVLT, 2019). In 2020, an Idaho law

was signed into effect that only allowed student participation on athletic teams that corresponded to their sex-assigned-at-birth versus their gender identity. At the same time, a law was signed that also prevented transgender students from updating their gender marker on their birth certificates (Minsberg, 2020). In August of 2020, a judge halted the implementation of both the athletics law as well as the birth certificate law, with the judge stating that there was a strong likelihood that the laws would be found unconstitutional (Stubbs, 2020). The Idaho athletics law is still under injunction as it moves through the courts (B. Jones, 2021).

During the 2021 legislative session, additional bills were signed into law in Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, Montana, Tennessee, and West Virginia prohibiting transgender student athletes from playing on the sports teams that corresponded to their gender identity, although the law in West Virginia is currently under injunction (Chandler, 2021; DeMillo, 2021; McElhinny, 2021; Silvers, 2021; Wagster Pettus, 2021; Yu, 2021). A bill in Iowa to limit transgender athletic participation almost made it through the Iowa 2021 session, as well (Gruber-Miller & Richardson, 2021). All of this legislation alleged that transgender female students have a competitive advantage and limit the opportunities for cisgender females (Blad, 2021; Wax-Thibodeaux & Schmidt, 2021). There is even the concern that cisgender males may elect to be transgender in order to gain a competitive advantage in sports. As quoted in Wax-Thibodeaux and Schmidt (2021), Tennessee state representative Bruce Griffey asked, “What if one of the boys is not doing well, so he pretends to be a transgender to win?” (para. 6). Lastly, during the 2021 state legislative season Arkansas passed legislation that prohibited doctors from providing gender-affirming treatment, such as hormone-blockers or hormones, to transgender children under the age of 18 (Schmidt, 2021). The legislature even overrode a governor-veto in order to enact the law, although it was ultimately put on hold by a federal judge (Carlisle, 2021;

Conradis, 2021). Thus, with a lack of established federal policy and guidance that is dependent upon the administration currently in power, many states have chosen to take action themselves, with some seeking to expand protections for transgender, non-binary, and GNC students, and others continuing to limit them. As such, this leaves the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming students highly dependent upon geography and their local community values.

Hayter (2016) provides an example in Missouri, in which there is no state law that assists schools or school divisions in making decisions when transgender students request assistance or access to facilities that correspond to their gender identity. Rather, it is left up to each school division to determine how they will handle requests from students and families. This can lead to situations where a transgender, non-binary, or GNC student in one district may have swift access to support and follow-up in an instance of bullying or harassment based upon their gender identity, while in a neighboring district there may be no such response in a similar scenario. Sohaili (2011) discusses that a potential solution was introduced into federal legislation in 2010 as the Student Non-Discrimination Act (SNDA). This legislation would have served to provide consistent guidance across the country for transgender and GNC students, but it failed to gain the necessary traction or support within the U.S. House of Representatives. The SNDA was reintroduced in the U.S. Congress in 2018 and faced a similar fate to the 2010 bill (Pike Bailey, 2018). Most recently, the Equality Act, outlawing discrimination against those who identify as LGBTQ, passed the U.S. House of Representatives but stalled in the U.S. Senate (DeBonis, 2021). This overall patchwork of currently existing broad federal policies, conflicting legal precedents, state guidance, and school district guidelines creates inequities for this group of students, with their individual educational experience highly dependent upon the zip code in which they reside.

LGBTQ Policy Impacts

While there has not been an evaluation of the direct impact of inclusive policies from states such as New York or California on transgender student well-being and experiences, we can look from amongst broader LGBTQ community research to gain an understanding of how these types of laws can have a positive effect on individuals' lives. First, Raifman, Moscoe, Austin, and McConnell (2017) studied the impact of same-sex marriage laws on LGBTQ students' reports of suicide, finding significant reductions in the suicidal behaviors of LGBTQ youth after the laws had been passed. The researchers evaluated a 16-year time span of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) between 1999 and 2015 using difference-in-differences analysis. Students were able to identify as heterosexual, lesbian or gay, bisexual, or unsure (questioning). There were 32 states that implemented same-sex marriage over the course of the study and 15 that did not, providing for a treatment and control group. Given that the YRBS employs random sampling of schools and classrooms and the fact that this study was inclusive of 47 of the 50 states, it is considered representative of the general student population in the U.S. The researchers analyzed the question on the YRBS regarding how many suicide-attempts a respondent had made in the prior year. For the purposes of the study, any answers at one or more were counted as affirmative. The researchers found that there was an overall 7% reduction for students who self-reported suicide attempts in the states that adopted same-sex marriage. The majority of the change came from those students who identified as LGBTQ in the states that had adopted same-sex marriage, with a 14% decline in these students' suicide attempts. These effects persisted even two years after the policy adoption. In another study focusing on the impact of same-sex marriage laws, Hatzenbuehler et al. (2012) explored the question of whether marriage equality in a state could reduce physical and mental health visits and expenditures in gay and

bisexual men in Massachusetts. The researchers analyzed the data for 1,211 gay and bisexual men who visited a community health clinic one year prior-to and one year after same-sex marriage adoption. The study found that there was a statistically significant reduction in the number of both physical and mental health visits between the two time frames, although there was no major impact on the cost. While these studies are not specific to transgender students, they do serve as evidence that state policies that provide for greater inclusion of marginalized groups have the capability of positively impacting lives.

Impact of Policy Implementation and Other Educator Factors

Through any examination of how policy or guidance may influence both school practice and the experience of students, consideration must be given to the idea that the existence of policy does necessarily equate to its being applied consistently or with fidelity as it may have originally been intended. To this point, in a qualitative study, Leonardi and Staley (2018) interviewed six principals about their implementation of a district-wide set of policies created to provide support to transgender and gender non-conforming students. The results indicated variance in how the individual schools were implementing the policies. While some schools focused on providing individual student interventions on a case-by-case basis, others used the policy as an opportunity to educate their entire communities on gender identity issues in order to transform their school cultures. One administrator spoke at great length about their supports of students during a gender transition, while others did not address the topic as part of the study. As such, while policies inclusive of gender identity may exist on paper, the experience of a transgender student in school is highly dependent upon how those directives are embraced and followed by the adults responsible for following them.

How these adults implement and support transgender students may also be limited by experience and training. Meyer et al. (2015) found that LGBTQ-identifying teachers were more likely to intervene on behalf of transgender students than their heterosexual colleagues, and that they reported higher instances of hearing homophobic language and negative remarks directed towards gender non-conforming boys. This indicates that the specific orientation and background of the adults in schools can influence how they support transgender students. Further, Greytak and Kosciw (2014) studied factors that influenced teacher intervention in instances of bullying or harassment of LGBTQ students. They found that knowing an LGBT identified student or having a personal connection to someone who identified as LGBT created a greater likelihood that they would intervene in a potentially negative situation. Further, the findings indicated that those teachers that had a greater awareness of LGBT bullying and harassment, such as the specific language used, the higher the indication that they would intervene. Both of these studies indicate the potential power of educator training around LGBTQ issues and topics in effecting the lives of transgender students. Thus, in addition to having nondiscrimination, antibullying/harassment, and transgender specific policies, schools must also consider how they will be implemented and monitored to ensure that students receive the same or similar experiences. Further, policy implementation without training may not yield results when filtered down to the day-to-day experiences of transgender students.

One Mid-Atlantic State

In many ways, one mid-Atlantic state (MAS) stands as a microcosm of the current landscape in the U.S. on the issue of transgender, non-binary, and GNC student rights. For instance, the landmark transgender rights court case, *G.G. v. Gloucester County School Board* (2015) came from a small school system of around 5,000 students in an area of the MAS that

stands on the line between rural and suburban (County of Gloucester, n.d.; Virginia Department of Education, 2020). Elsewhere in the MAS and closer to what are considered the northern suburbs of a major metropolitan area, Truong (2018) reported that a transgender middle school student was prevented from sheltering in either the male or female locker room during a lockdown drill due to the staff's inability to make a decision as to which was most appropriate in that moment. The student was left in a hallway during the drill. More recently, school board meetings across the MAS have become contentious as the rights of transgender students are debated by local school boards (Heim et al., 2021; Natanson, 2021a, 2021c). These are just some of the stories that have made national headlines, marking the MAS as one of the epicenters of the debate on policy and practice regarding transgender students.

In terms of political leanings, most recently the MAS supported democrat Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election. Yet, upon a closer examination of the election map of the MAS, one sees a clear split in political leanings between the urban and suburban areas and the extensive amounts of the state that remain rural (Politico, n.d.). This is a shift from prior years, as the Pew Research Center (2014) had previously considered the MAS to be relatively conservative or moderate. These political changes have also had an impact on local school board elections, particularly in some of the population centers (Truong, 2019). However, the transformation from red-to-blue is by no means static, given that the republican candidate for governor recently won the 2021 gubernatorial election on a firmly conservative platform (Santamariña & Levitt, 2021). As such, because of where the progressive shifts have occurred, mainly in the MAS' dense population centers, it has left sharp divides in terms of what are considered community norms and values, depending upon whether the area is urban, suburban, or rural.

Moreover, as the political landscape has ebbed towards the progressive, it has begun to effect change for transgender, non-binary, and GNC students. Going into the 2020 legislative session, for the first time in over a quarter century democrats controlled both legislative houses as well as the Governor's mansion (Austermuhle et al., 2019). This resulted in the state legislature being able to pass a bill, ultimately signed by the governor, mandating that the state department of education create a model transgender policy that addressed areas such as nondiscrimination, bullying and harassment, records, and the use of facilities. Once these guidelines were published, school divisions were required to adopt policies that at a minimum met the provisions contained within the model guidelines (Natanson, 2020; Treatment of Transgender Students; Policies, 2020). This marked a transition within the MAS, moving from a scenario where each individual school district determined their own regulatory guidance regarding the support of transgender students, to one where all were required to adopt state-supported standards of practice.

Transgender Policy Adoption in the MAS

Prior to the state law, policies that supported transgender students had been in development in the MAS over a number of years at the discretion of individual school divisions, and not without controversy. For example, the Smythe County School Board¹ had added gender identity to its nondiscrimination policy in May of 2015. The auditorium at the Board meeting was full, with an estimated 500 or more members of the community packing the space. There were boos and hisses as the debate ensued, with the Chair frequently having to hammer her gavel to maintain order, at times indicating that she might need to have security clear the entire auditorium in order to move the meeting forward (Shapiro, 2015). While the addition to the

¹ All names of locales have been de-identified and provided with pseudonyms.

policy was approved, a subsequent draft regulation was tabled indefinitely in the summer of 2016 by the Board, ostensibly due to the continued appeals of the Fourth Circuit decision in the Grimm case (Basch, 2016; Fairfax County Public Schools, n.d.). Almost five years later, the school district quietly published a finalized regulation with no fanfare or public debate (Fairfax County Public Schools, 2020). Thus, within a matter of a few years, there was much change with regards to policy development and adoption within that specific district.

Similar to Smythe County Public Schools, several of the MAS's school divisions, primarily clustered in a densely populated suburban area of the state, have added and included gender identity in their nondiscrimination policies within the last five-to-ten years (Alexandria City School Board, 2014; Arlington County School Board, 2017a; Fairfax County School Board, 2015; Loudoun County School Board, 2019a; Prince William County School Board, 2020). In-and-of themselves, these policies established that transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students could not be singled out and denied opportunities, access to education, or associated programming due simply to their gender identity or expression. Moreover, they enumerated a process by which a student and their family could address concerns of discrimination to include reporting and investigations. However, standing alone they did not establish how a culture of inclusivity for transgender students would look within a school.

Along these lines, the school divisions also provided protections against bullying and harassment to transgender, non-binary, and GNC students. These could sometimes be found in a separate policy on bullying or harassment or contained within the body of the school division's student code of conduct that provided the expectations for student behavior as well as consequences should that guidance not be followed. Many also included the procedures for reporting instances of bullying or harassment, often including opportunities to do so

anonymously. Most importantly, these regulations sent the message that bullying or harassing students based upon their gender identity was a violation of school division requirements (Alexandria City Public Schools, 2020; Arlington County School Board, 2017b; Fairfax County School Board, 2020; Loudoun County School Board, 2019b; Prince William County Schools, 2020). Still, similar to nondiscrimination, antibullying/harassment policies that were inclusive of gender identity alone did not provide guidance to communities around the rights of transgender students to be called by their preferred name and pronouns, what level of access they might expect to restrooms and locker rooms that corresponded to their gender identity, and how and which records they might be eligible to update.

Given this lack of clear guidance, prior to the development of the state's model transgender policy, two school divisions in the MAS, Smythe and one of their neighboring divisions, developed specific regulations to support transgender students. These school division policies addressed definitions, records, names, and facilities, in addition to field trips and co-curricular activities. Overall, they sought to affirm the gender identity of the student by calling the student by their preferred name and pronouns, updating records to the extent possible to reflect the asserted name and gender marker, allowing students to use the facilities with which they felt most comfortable and which aligned to their identity, as well as supporting their participation in any activities that might be separated by gender in a way that met the needs of the student (Arlington County Public Schools, 2019; Fairfax County Public Schools, 2020). These policies provided guidance to students, families, school staff, and the broader community as to how to support transgender students, as well as schools' obligations to affirm their identities through standardized practices.

It was amidst this policy and political landscape that the MAS' model transgender policy, mandated by the state legislature, was developed in the second half of 2020 by the state department of education with a group of contributors that included school stakeholders, community organizations, parents or guardians, and students (Virginia Department of Education, 2021). Per established rules, the guidance was placed for public comment in January of 2021, and received well over 5,000 comments over the course of the month, delaying its date of publication to ensure all feedback was reviewed (Rodriguez, 2021; Virginia Department of Education & Virginia Board of Education, 2021). Similar to the transgender policies developed earlier by the two school districts, the MAS' model policy covered transgender student rights with regards to pronouns and names, records, facility use, field trips, communication, and privacy. Once shared with school divisions, the law required the creation and adoption of similar policies by every school division in the MAS for the start of the 2021-22 school year (Treatment of Transgender Students; Policies, 2020).

Even with the mandate to adopt the model policies codified in law, there has been significant resistance by communities, school boards, and school staff. One district ultimately adopted policies to align to those of the state, but only after Board meetings reached fever pitches of anger from those opposing their implementation, culminating in an arrest at one of the more contentious sessions (Heim et al., 2021; Natanson, 2021a). This same division recently reinstated and reached a financial settlement with a teacher in the district who was placed on administrative leave after he spoke at a Board meeting and said he would not be complying with the district's transgender policy as it violated his religious beliefs (Natanson, 2021c; Natanson & McCartney, 2021). In other school divisions, Boards have either continued to table addressing the model policy requirements, adopted half measures, or voted to violate the law and decline

adopting any policies in line with those provided by the state (DelBel, 2021; Jackson, 2021; WCYB, 2021). They have done this in spite of guidance from the state superintendent that clarified that those school divisions who do not adopt the policies per state law take on full liability for any legal challenges that may present (Lane, 2021). To this end, one school division in the MAS is now facing a lawsuit from a group of transgender students and their families as a result of their Board's refusal to pass policies in compliance with the law (Natanson, 2021d).

This is the at-times contentious landscape faced by transgender, non-binary, and GNC students, their families, and their schools in the MAS. As a result of the law, many of these students now have access to protections through locally adopted policies that align with those provided by the state. However, still others find little support and guidance in regulatory language in their school communities, leaving them at the mercy of whatever is deemed acceptable and permissible by their local school. Across the board, given all of these policies' relative infancy in the MAS, much is still unknown as to how the inclusion of standardized regulations and procedures for transgender students ultimately effects their experiences of school, as well as their long-term outcomes.

Research Focus

Overall, schools, either of their own volition or by mandate, have attempted in recent years to provide LGBTQ students, and transgender, non-binary, and GNC students in particular, with protections and supports in an effort to create safe and welcoming environments, often through the inclusion of policies and procedures (Arlington County Public Schools, 2019; Fairfax County Public Schools, 2020; Fairfax County School Board, 2015; Madison Metropolitan School District, 2018; Stafford County School Board, 2014). Parallel to these movements in policy, findings from polling by Gallup (2017) and Brown (2017) have indicated

that public opinion about those who identify as transgender, non-binary, and GNC continues to shift to be more favorable, although movement remains slow and incremental. Thus, over the last decade, schools have worked to create environments that are supportive of transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming students. Much of this attention and focus of research and policy has been based on the experiences and needs of middle school and high school students. However, there are numerous conversations that anecdotally point to a growing number of younger elementary aged students who are identifying as transgender. Blad (2017), writes that due to the greater visibility in the media and in communities, those who support transgender children believe that many are identifying at earlier ages. Will (2019) concurs in their reporting, stating that the current generation of transgender students will have often “come out” in elementary or middle schools. This is not necessarily to be unexpected. Kahn (2016) shares that one’s sense of gender identity is formed by four-years of age. Rafferty (2018) confirms this, sharing that even by age two children are aware of the physical differences between peers whose sex-assigned-at-birth is male versus female. Given how early the concept of gender forms, it makes sense that elementary aged transgender students would begin to assert their identities, particularly as they pick up on language and terms held within the current national conversations on gender identity.

In order for schools to make solid policy and practice decisions, it is important to understand the full developmental range of student experiences, to include how elementary aged transgender, non-binary, and GNC students view their interactions with school. Current research and media reporting focuses almost exclusively on that of high school students, with occasional forays into data or information from middle school. As such, there is a true gap in comprehending whether or not the programs and systems being developed impact all students in

the same way, particularly around what is most effective and where they may still be areas for growth. By honing in on elementary transgender, non-binary, and GNC students, new research can begin to complete a clearer picture of the full K-12 landscape. In this way, schools and school divisions can better consider any nuances in their decision-making that may be needed.

As such, through interviews in a single MAS, this study will seek to answer the questions: How do transgender, non-binary, and GNC elementary-aged students experience and navigate “schooling” in the MAS? What do these students reveal as support systems? What do these students identify as barriers?

Research Interest

In my roles as a choral music teacher, school counselor, and then central office administrator, I have been engaged in the policy and practice work for LGBTQ students, and more specifically transgender students, over the expanse of my twenty-year career in education. In these roles I have helped to draft policies and advocated for greater inclusion of LGTBQ students, staff, and topics at every opportunity. Much of this work has been done quietly, behind the scenes of more visible progress. I have written articles for professional association publications, presented at local, state, and national conferences, and, in full disclosure, am one of the contributors listed in the MAS’ model transgender policy. A substantial part of my professional life has been engaged in how schools can better support LGBTQ students and their families, and it seemed only a natural fit to focus my dissertation efforts on this topic.

Moreover, in my central office administrative work, I have supported a significant number of elementary school principals, school counselors, teachers, and transgender students over the last ten years. Yet, when I have examined the research literature, very little speaks to their experiences. This has often led me to wonder how their day-to-day may be similar and

different from that of their older peers. Finally, I myself identity as a gay man, and have seen over my lifetime how far the pendulum has moved in the United States for me in terms of public support as well the removal of barriers for rights such as marriage. I am indebted to so many people throughout history who have fought and advocated for me to be able to live the life that I do today, and I believe it is my moral responsibility to use the privilege that I have to continue to advocate for LGBTQ rights, inclusion, and indeed celebration in the spaces in which I move. As such, this project is a continuation of that work.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Risk Factors for LGBTQ Students in Schools

Students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) often have a different experience of K-12 schooling than their non-LGBTQ peers. Espelage and Swearer (2008) reviewed research on LGBTQ students in schools and found that being seen as anything other than heterosexual was perceived as being negative. The authors discovered that this linkage of heterosexuality with the positive and other sexual identities with the undesirable began as early as elementary school. In the latest of a biennial quantitative survey study of LGBTQ student experiences in schools, Kosciw et al. (2020) identified that LGBTQ students who self-reported high levels of harassment or discrimination based upon their identity also reported higher levels of symptoms of depression. Similarly, in another quantitative survey study Toomey et al. (2010) found that LGBTQ students' experiences of bullying and harassment correlated to an increased likelihood of mental health issues, such as depression. The authors noted that it was not the students' identities that led to this increased risk of mental health challenges, but rather it was the bullying and harassment they endured based upon their asserted identity. However, Robinson and Espelage (2012) also sought to better understand this relationship between bullying and harassment and LGBTQ students' risk for suicide ideation through an examination of the data from a comprehensive survey of students in grades 7 through 12 in a single county in Wisconsin. The authors here found that even when controlling for bullying and harassment, LGBTQ students were still at a higher risk for suicide ideation. They asserted that simply focusing on reducing bullying and harassment would not completely mitigate LGBTQ students' mental health risks. Further, Hatzenbuehler et al. (2014) also examined the potential risk factors for suicidal behaviors in LGBTQ youth across multiple states

using data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a survey given nationally to representative samples of high school students and some middle school students every two years, combined with an analysis of school climates in selected locales. School climates were evaluated on the presence of a gay-straight alliance (GSA), LGBTQ inclusive policies, and staff trainings. Here the authors found that in areas with more supportive school climates there was a decreased report of suicidal ideation and behaviors in students. Thus, while the exact circumstances that ultimately lead to concerns regarding LGBTQ students and their emotional wellbeing may be under debate, a key finding for schools is this population's increased risk of suicidal behaviors and mental health issues.

Berry (2018) wrote that "...LGBT [students] who are bullied emerge having been shaped in damaging and often lasting ways" (p. 505). In their biennial survey study, Kosciw et al. (2020) found that LGBTQ students overwhelmingly self-reported experiencing verbal and sexual harassment based upon either their sexual or gender identity, or both, with many also experiencing physical harassment or assault. Further, almost 45% of the LGBTQ students surveyed also reported being harassed online. For those students who indicated higher levels of victimization, they also reported having lower grades, lower attendance, fewer aspirations to attend postsecondary institutions, and higher involvement with school discipline. In seeking to better understand the school experiences of the LGBTQ student population regarding victimization, Aragon et al. (2014) used youth risk and behavioral survey data across a single county in Wisconsin to analyze the relationship between students' experiences with bullying and harassment and their academic performance, school attendance, graduation rates, and postsecondary plans. Here the authors found that the victimization of students partially influenced their academic and attendance performance. Kosciw et al. (2009) completed a

quantitative analysis of self-reported survey data from 13 to 21 year-old LGBTQ students to examine if there were variations in their experiences of harassment based upon race, ethnicity, age, gender, and locale. The findings indicated that male-identified LGBTQ students and those that were younger were at a higher risk of victimization, with those LGBTQ students who attended rural schools being at the highest risk of all. Although there was some variation based upon race and ethnicity, it was not consistent. While much of the research on LGBTQ youth is quantitative and survey-based, Grossman et al. (2009) completed several focus group interviews with LGBTQ-identified students in order to better understand how they experienced school and, in particular, violence. The students indicated that their peers in school used their heterosexuality as a means of wielding power, and that not only did they face bullying and harassment from other students but also from the adults in the building. These actions by both students and staff led to LGBTQ students fearing for their safety, which then resulted in school avoidance, with some only reengaging with their education when they found another school or alternative educational program at which they felt safe. Consequently, LGBTQ students report significant amounts of bullying, harassment, and violence while at school. These negative experiences may then have some relationship to lower academic outcomes, lower postsecondary aspirations, and lower school attendance and engagement for these students.

Supports for LGBTQ Students

Knowing that research indicates that LGBTQ students are at higher risk for bullying and harassment, mental health issues, lower grades, lower graduation rates, lower postsecondary aspirations, and weaker attendance, it begs the question as to what specific antidotes or solutions exist that schools can examine to better support this student population. In a quantitative survey study, Kosciw et al. (2013) examined how policies that included specific protections for LGBTQ

students, curricula that reflected the contributions of LGBTQ people to society and history, staff that were supportive of LGBTQ students, and the presence of a GSA impacted the self-reported experiences of LGBTQ students. The authors here found that the factor that had the most impact was supportive adults within the school building, which was correlated to lower reports of harassment, higher reports of self-esteem, higher grades, and stronger attendance from the students. The presence of a GSA and an inclusive curriculum were found to connect to lower rates of victimization, and the presence of inclusive policies was found to be related to higher levels of self-esteem in students. As such, not every asset or action yielded results in the same way. Seelman and Walker (2018) sought to examine the relationship between state anti-bullying laws that specifically included sexual orientation and LGBTQ students' reports of harassment, absenteeism, injury, and suicidal ideation. By using YRBS data from 22 states over ten years, they found that the presence of an inclusive anti-bullying law correlated to a 7.5% reduction of LGBTQ students reporting harassment when compared to a state without such a law. There was only a minor impact on student absenteeism, and limited impact on suicidal ideation and injuries.

When further exploring the impact and nature of supportive staff, Milburn and Palladino (2012) studied pre-service teachers to determine their disposition towards LGBTQ students and their willingness to intervene in situations where students may have been bullied and harassed. They found that the pre-service teachers were positively inclined towards the LGBTQ students and wanted to support those who were being victimized. However, the pre-service teachers also felt they needed to be provided with more strategies to be able to do so. Further, the pre-service teachers were not able to connect the victimization of LGBTQ students to other negative outcomes such as reduced attendance or academic performance. Along these same lines, in a quantitative survey study, Swanson and Gettinger (2016) investigated how teachers' knowledge

of LGBTQ issues, teacher training on LGBTQ issues, and the presence of GSA within the school impacted teachers' roles in supporting LGBTQ students. While having knowledge about the risks and situations of LGBTQ students did not have an impact on teacher intervention and support, teachers who had more extensive training were more likely to help and encourage these students. Moreover, teachers in schools with GSA were also more likely to be active in their support of LGBTQ students. This is similar to the findings of Greytak and Kosciw (2014) in a quantitative self-reported survey study where a teacher's level of understanding of anti-LGBTQ bullying and harassment and comfort level with intervening predicted a greater chance that they would engage in interrupting victimization. Further, teachers who knew an LGBTQ student or person in their lives were more likely to intervene on behalf of students. Maru (2017) and Simons and Cuadrado (2018) explored the impact of school counselors' advocacy efforts as they related to their LGBTQ students. Both sets of researchers completed interviews with small numbers of school counselors, nine and twelve, respectively. They found that school counselors acknowledged their responsibility to advocate for this group of students and took it upon themselves to gather outside support resources and collaborate with school and community stakeholders to work towards greater inclusion.

Several studies have also focused more specifically on the relationship between GSA and LGBTQ student outcomes. Poteat et al. (2013) examined the YRBS data for a single county in Wisconsin and matched it to data regarding the presence of a GSA within those schools. They found that LGBTQ students reported less substance use, less casual sex, and fewer suicide attempts in schools that were known to have GSA, but that it did not impact reports of victimization or suicide ideation. Similarly, Li et al. (2019) cross referenced youth risk and behavioral survey data in British Columbia, Canada, with information about GSA to include the

length of time a GSA had been in existence, examining not only the presence of the GSA's impact on LGB student experiences but also how a GSA might effect these experiences over time. The findings indicated that the school climate reports of LGB students improved over each year of a GSA's existence, even when controlled for other factors. To better understand the nuances of the relationship between GSA and LGBTQ students, Porta et al. (2017) interviewed LGBTQ students about their perceptions of GSA. The authors found that GSA created a sense of shared community, connected the students to resources such as caring adults or community providers, and offered a safe place for students to engage with their identity. The benefits of GSA in creating a shared community was further corroborated by St. John et al. (2014). Thus, inclusive policies and laws, supportive adults and training for teachers, GSA, and inclusive curriculum are all promising practices for schools to consider in an attempt to moderate the potential risks and challenges for LGBTQ students in schools.

Critical Analysis of LGBTQ Education Research

There are many common threads and themes that emerge from research into LGBTQ student experiences, from mental health risks, experiences of bullying and harassment, lower academic performance, and lower attendance (Aragon et al., 2014; Grossman et al., 2009; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2009, 2020; Robinson & Espelage, 2012; Toomey et al., 2010). Moreover, factors such as inclusive policies, curriculum that is inclusive of LGBTQ people and issues, supportive staff members, staff trainings, and GSA correlate to fewer risk factors and negative outcomes in these students (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Kosciw et al., 2013; Li et al., 2019; Maru, 2017; Porta et al., 2017; Poteat et al., 2013; Seelman & Walker, 2018; Simons & Cuadrado, 2018; St. John et al., 2014; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). This being stated, there are some limitations in the research literature. In terms of methodology, much of the

research focused on establishing the risks amongst this population as well as the role that schools play in the well-being and achievement of LGBTQ students is based upon large national surveys which employ convenience or snowball sampling techniques versus attempts at random assignment (Kosciw et al., 2009, 2013, 2020; Toomey et al., 2010). Thus, while these studies provide a great deal of data and information as to the risk factors and behaviors of LGBTQ students across the country, it is possible that they are missing the data from some students, such as those who were never given an opportunity to participate due to a lack of awareness. Further, the results may be skewed in favor of those LGBTQ students who had the motivation and drive to want to take and complete these surveys. Also, while large survey studies provide us with a birds-eye view of these students, they do not give us high levels of detail that allow us to understand the lives of these students with significant depth and nuance. Additionally, these studies all focus on secondary students, limiting the knowledge about elementary-aged students (Aragon et al., 2014; Kosciw et al., 2009, 2013, 2020; Robinson & Espelage, 2012; Toomey et al., 2010). When we examine some of the studies focused on learning more about the role of adults in supporting LGBTQ students, we find a similar issue in the sampling of the study participants in that they use either convenience or snowball methods, limiting their extrapolation to a larger population (Milburn & Palladino, 2012; Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Moreover, some of these studies were narrow in scope, for example narrowing in on a small number of a specific staff classification, such as school counselors (Maru, 2017; Simons & Cuadrado, 2018). Further, the study that examined the impact of having LGBTQ inclusive policies and curriculum on this group's school experiences itself noted that the data on these factors came from students' self-report versus an objective review, making the presence of these variables based solely on

student perception (Kosciw et al., 2013). Future studies would need to establish the criteria used to identify an inclusive policy or inclusive curriculum based upon objective measures.

Perhaps, though, one of the largest gaps in this particular body of research is a lack of focus on transgender students as compared to their lesbian, gay, and bisexual peers. Whereas sexual orientation involves emotional and romantic attraction, gender identity is about one's sense of their male or female self or the spectrum in between, largely influenced by cultural norms (Garofalo et al., 2006). Moreover, the legal and policy landscape for transgender students in schools continues to be in flux, and subject to local standards, state requirements, and ever shifting interpretations in the courts (Eckes, 2017; Hayter, 2016; Sohaili, 2011). As such, the potential differences in how transgender students experience school versus their sexual minority peers is a question for exploration. Yet, much of the research examines LGBTQ students as a primarily homogenous group, providing little differentiation into any nuances between the subgroups (Aragon et al., 2014; Espelage & Swearer, 2008; Grossman et al., 2009; Kosciw et al., 2009; Porta et al., 2017; Poteat et al., 2013; Robinson & Espelage, 2012; St. John et al., 2014). Some studies leave out transgender students entirely, including those using data from the YRBS, which only includes a demographic question about sexual orientation, having just recently offered an optional question to localities about gender identity (Centers for Disease Control, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2014; Li et al., 2019; Seelman & Walker, 2018). There are some studies on the larger LGBTQ population that do spend time focusing on transgender students, yet research focused to this population is key to understanding if and how their school experiences differ not only from their LGB peers, but from the student population as a whole (Kosciw et al., 2020; Toomey et al., 2010).

Risk Factors for Transgender Students in Schools

For research purposes, transgender is an umbrella term that may encompass those students whose sex-assigned-at-birth does not match their gender identity. Thus, it is not only inclusive of students who would identify as truly “transgender,” but also non-binary students who identify with neither gender, or gender queer or gender fluid students who find themselves somewhere along the spectrum of male and female identities (Allen et al., 2020). Moreover, it is important to acknowledge that transgender students are not a new phenomenon in schools, but rather are an “integral part of the transgender twentieth century and the broader twentieth-century history of sex, gender, and race...” (Gill-Peterson, 2018, p. 3). This includes a history of transgender students in schools (Gill-Peterson, 2018).

When examining risk and outcome factors for transgender students, Clark et al. (2014) analyzed the data from a national survey of secondary students in New Zealand that included questions about gender identity. The survey used random selection for sampling, allowing for greater connections to be made to the general population. For the students that identified as transgender, the authors found that they were at a higher risk of bullying and harassment and suicide ideation. Further, these students indicated that they struggled to access affirming healthcare due to their gender identity. Garofalo et al. (2006) completed a quantitative study using survey data with a small convenience sample of female transgender youth of color at LGBTQ-supportive community centers, finding that sexual victimization and housing insecurity were high for the group. Further, similar to Clark et al. (2014), the study participants also indicated struggles to access healthcare. In looking to qualitative studies, Grossman and D’Augelli (2007) further explored the issue of suicidal ideation and behaviors through interviews of transgender youth. They found that almost half of the participants interviewed had seriously

contemplated suicide, and around a quarter had attempted suicide at some point. Of note in their findings was that parental abuse was a recurring theme, particularly in those students who had made suicidal attempts. In another qualitative interview study, Sausa (2005) interviewed 24 transgender students in Philadelphia to specifically gain information as to the nuances of their school experiences. The participants reported high levels of verbal and physical harassment in school, sharing that they did not feel safe. One student had even been assaulted with a baseball bat. Further, they shared that they avoided bathrooms and locker rooms, and perceived a lack of support from school staff to include teachers that attempted to persuade them out of their gender identity. Consequently, these findings indicate that transgender students may have elevated basic needs such as shelter and healthcare, and that they remain at risk for suicide ideation and sexual harassment or assault similar to their LGB peers.

In picking up on the thread from Sausa (2005) regarding the impact of school climate and culture on transgender students, in their larger quantitative survey study on LGBTQ youth, Kosciw et al. (2020) found that significant percentages of transgender students self-reported that they had been prevented from using their name and pronouns in school and were required to use the restrooms and locker rooms of their sex-assigned-at-birth. Moreover, they found that transgender students self-reported more negative school climates than their LGBQ peers. Jones et al. (2016) completed a survey of transgender students in Australia using convenience and snowball sampling techniques and found that students were often only given the choice of using either a single-use restroom or locker room facility or one associated with their sex-assigned-at-birth, rather than those that corresponded to their gender identity. Additionally, the students noted that there were higher levels of peer harassment if the school staff were not supportive of transgender students and chose not to intervene when it occurred. This resulted in school-

avoidance on the part of many transgender students, with some choosing to change schools or drop-out altogether. A unique finding from this study was that nearly a quarter of the participants indicated that engaging in transgender activism helped them to cease engaging in self-harm or assisted in mitigating suicide ideation. Given that one of the challenges with research focusing on the LGBTQ student population is that it often fails to differentiate the experiences of the T from the LGBTQ, Allen et al. (2020) further sought to determine if there were differences between those students in the T group who identified as transgender versus those who identified as non-binary. Using snowball sampling techniques, the authors surveyed students in Wisconsin and found that there was little differentiation between the two subgroups' feelings of safety and belonging in schools, which were overall positive to neutral, although the non-binary students were less likely to be "out," meaning open about their identity with family and communities, as opposed to the transgender-identified students. When looking to studies that focused on the nuanced lives of these students in schools, Grossman and D'Augelli (2006) interviewed three groups of transgender students in New York City to better understand those factors that influenced their experiences. In addition to findings that corroborated challenges with accessing mental and physical health care and housing insecurity, the authors found that school was in general not a safe space, with many students electing to transfer to other schools due to excessive harassment based on their gender identity. Johnson et al. (2014) completed a study using participatory action research methods where the nine student participants also assisted in coding and interpreting the findings. They established three themes centered around the complex nature of their identities and how they were often misunderstood by school staff, safety concerns, where both they and their siblings were harassed due to their gender identities, and the need for action to include staff training, access to facilities and GSA supports. Johns et al. (2021) completed

interviews and focus groups of forty-four secondary transgender-identifying students in the southeastern United States. Their findings mirrored other studies regarding meeting barriers in schools such as challenges with name changes and being addressed by their deadname, and the participants also expressed frustration at the lack of foundational knowledge on transgender issues in personnel such as school counselors. Finally, in a mixed-methods study, McGuire et al. (2010) completed four focus group interviews as part of the qualitative section. In their interviews with transgender students, they found that harassment on the part of students was a generally common experience, although intervention from teachers was fairly rare. However, the students indicated that they were unlikely to also be harassed from staff. Here again, many of the students who had been harassed elected to transfer to a different school. As such, transgender students face challenges in finding inviting and inclusive school climates that support and acknowledge their identities, and as a result may stop attending and seek to change schools in search of more supportive spaces.

Thus, in many respects, transgender students have similar experiences to the broader LGBTQ group, including bullying, verbal and physical harassment and assault, and suicide ideation (Clark et al., 2014; Garofalo et al., 2006; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006, 2007; Johnson et al., 2014; T. Jones et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2020; McGuire et al., 2010; Sausa, 2005). However, there are some factors that are more specific to transgender youth in schools, such as being called the correct names and pronouns, restroom and locker room access and avoidance, and issues with finding affirming healthcare (Clark et al., 2014; Garofalo et al., 2006; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Johns et al., 2021; T. Jones et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2020; Sausa, 2005). Moreover, several studies noted that transgender students would transfer to different schools in order to find a safe and supportive school climate (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; T. Jones et al.,

2016; McGuire et al., 2010). Consequently, by examining this group of students separately from the larger LGBTQ umbrella, nuances and issues that are specific to transgender students emerge.

Supports for Transgender Students

Just as there has been research into the factors that improve the academic and social-emotional outcomes for LGBTQ students, there are studies that have sought to determine those actions or climates that provide transgender students with the best opportunities to thrive. Greytak et al. (2013) used data from a biennial survey of LGBTQ youth using convenience and snowball sampling techniques to examine whether or not there were significant differences in the types of supports noted by the transgender group alone when compared to the full LGBTQ group. The authors found that the presence of a GSA, supportive staff, and the existence of an LGBTQ inclusive curriculum correlated to lower levels of bullying and harassment. These three assets in addition to the presence of LGBTQ inclusive anti-bullying and nondiscrimination policies also correlated to better attendance for transgender students. In a further examination of the role of supportive adults, Andrzejewski et al. (2021) interviewed thirty-three transgender students between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five about the role of their parents in their lives. They found that the students indicated that their parents either accepted them when they came-out as transgender, or that they worked over time to get to a place of acceptance. Further, they assisted with items such as financial and health support. In looking at it from the parent perspective, Dangaltcheva et al. (2021) studied a group of twenty parents of transgender children age twelve-to-eighteen through a support group structure, finding that the parents felt a loss when their children came out, and that they knew that their children needed to connect to peers who could relate to their experience. They acknowledged that sometimes this was only able to be done through online communication, and that there were both benefits to this in that their

children were able to meet with other transgender individuals, but also challenges around harassment and fears for safety if their child met with an online connection for the first time.

Meyer et al. (2016a) interviewed 26 teachers in Canada in a qualitative study to better understand what teachers felt were barriers and supports for transgender students in schools. Amongst those items that were felt to be supportive were alternative school programs that included restorative practices, flexibility in courses, a value for non-traditional students, and limited activities that were differentiated by gender. Moreover, they also found that transgender students who possessed the tools to advocate for themselves, staff who ensured safety and a positive school climate, inclusive policies and curriculum, and GSA-like groups for students also led to better outcomes. In another qualitative interview case study, Leonardi and Staley (2018) interviewed six principals working to implement transgender inclusive district policies within their schools. The findings indicated that those who were most engaged were focused on creating changes in culture, not simply implementation of the policy. Further, most saw implementation as something that had to be addressed regularly and over time through professional development opportunities with teachers and staff versus simply addressed in a single training. Even with inclusive policies featured as a potential support in the literature, simply mandating them may not be enough. Meyer and Keenan (2018) examined ten sets of district policies supportive of transgender students in the San Francisco area to determine their compliance with state laws, and found that only one school district's anti-bullying, nondiscrimination, and transgender-specific policies fully complied with state requirements. Thus, supportive and caring adults, to include parents, as well as GSA, LGBTQ inclusive curriculum, and alternative programs with flexibility for students are all factors that may assist in better supporting transgender students (Andrzejewski et al., 2021; Dangaltcheva et al., 2021; Greytak et al., 2013; Meyer et al., 2016).

When it comes to inclusive policies, they may also be an asset for transgender students, but much depends on the nature of the policy as well as its implementation (Leonardi & Staley, 2018; Meyer & Keenan, 2018). As acknowledged by Spillane et al. (2002), there are a variety of factors that create scenarios where the same policy may be implemented in a variety of ways dependent upon the location and the persons responsible for putting it into practice.

Critical Analysis and Future Directions for Transgender Student Research

Over the last twenty years the research literature has greatly expanded understandings specific to transgender students and their experiences in schools. Further, potential areas of policy focus have been identified for those seeking to improve the outcomes and opportunities for this population. However, there is additional research needed on the impact of transgender inclusive policies on their educational lives, given that what we do know often comes from self-report data and not necessarily an objective examination of the policies themselves (Greytak et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2020). While there have been attempts to explore this issue, yet more is needed to establish greater understandings of the type and significance of the correlations (Leonardi & Staley, 2018; Meyer & Keenan, 2018). Additionally, almost all of the research on transgender students cited comes from convenience and snowball sampling or are qualitative studies not meant to be generalizable beyond the specific context (Allen et al., 2020; Andrzejewski et al., 2021; Dangaltcheva et al., 2021; Garofalo et al., 2006; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006, 2007; T. Jones et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2020; McGuire et al., 2010; Sausa, 2005). Because the YRBS now has a demographic question about sexual orientation and uses random sampling procedures, the use of its data regarding LGB students can be applied more broadly as potentially representative of the U.S. student population. However, the YRBS has yet to have a question regarding gender identity on all surveys, excepting the small number of

localities that may choose to include one (Centers for Disease Control, 2019a, 2019b, 2019c). Thus, it is still difficult to gain a full picture of the school experiences of all those students who may identify as transgender across the U.S., given that there are those who may not yet be reflected in the data through the sampling procedures used.

However, perhaps one of the most noticeable gaps in the research is that there are few studies of any kind that examine the experiences of elementary aged students who identify as transgender. Children identify with a specific gender as early as three years of age, including those that identify as transgender. Further, anecdotally more and more young children are identifying with a gender other than their sex-assigned at birth (Olson & Gülgöz, 2018). There have been some more recent attempts to examine this population. As part of a longitudinal study, Olson and Gülgöz (2018) completed early research that examined how the concept of gender developed in transgender youth when compared to cisgender youth. Here, they found that the development of gender identity was similar between the two groups, although transgender children and their siblings tended to be more tolerant of variation in the gender expression of others when compared with cisgender children. In another study examining the human development of transgender children, Rubin et al. (2020) completed a quantitative interview study to explore if gender stereotyping was different between transgender and cisgender children. They found that all the children showed similar amounts of stereotype assignments to what was in the realm of a “boy” and a “girl,” but found that the transgender children who held more closely to the stereotypes for themselves were less likely to believe that others would also hold those views. Olson et al. (2019) sought to understand the impetus behind whether or not a transgender child ultimately chose to transition by completing interviews of their parents. The authors found that simply having the discussions in-and-of-themselves regarding the possibility

of transitioning to a gender identity other than the sex-assigned-at-birth did not have an influence on whether or not the child ultimately made a transition. Further, any decisions about transitioning were squarely led by the child versus by the parents. Frohard-Dourlent (2018) examined education and younger transgender students through the lens of the educators and found that staff were more uncomfortable with gender fluid children versus those transgender children who chose either male or female identities. Additionally, the younger the student was, the less comfortable they were with the students serving as the leaders of their social transition at school. Thus, there is research that provides us with information on elementary-aged transgender students, yet it is related to identity development or centered on the perceptions of parents or educators versus on the educational experiences as provided directly from the students themselves.

When seeking out studies that do include the voices of elementary transgender students, Goldstein et al. (2018) completed a case study examining teacher reactions and understandings following the viewing of interviews of a single transgender girl and her family. The video interviews themselves highlighted how a strong collaboration between the family and the student's teacher was able to create a positive and supportive climate for the child as they transitioned. Further, the teachers that reviewed the videos and accompanying information reflected that the educators in the video had a strong understanding of the importance of their role in taking action to help transgender students and also commented on the need for school staff to be educated on the transgender student experience. While these results are focused on the elementary school level, the interviews and data were almost entirely from the view of the parent and educator. This was similar to a study completed by Neary (2018) that focused in part on the experiences of a single transgender student in an elementary school in Ireland, yet included few

examples from the student and little of their actual voice within the findings. Rather, it centered on the voices of the parents and the educators, and affirmed how one teacher's practices underwent change through engagement with a single transgender student in their classrooms, for example in terms of dividing the class by gender for activities. Mackenzie and Talbott (2018) completed a qualitative study using photovoice methods exploring gender and gender justice, yet the group that was studied had only a single transgender student and one student who defined themselves as gender expansive amongst many more children with LGBTQ parents or children who saw themselves as LGBTQ allies. Their minimal representation amongst the participants was reflected by minimal attributions within the findings and little inclusion of their unique perspective as transgender students. One highlight in the findings was that the students, transgender and allies alike, indicated their own power and agency in taking ownership of their school spaces to create more inclusive environments where everyone on the gender spectrum could thrive. Lewis and Eckes (2020) completed a qualitative study where they reviewed the amicus briefs filed in support of Gavin Grimm, a transgender student who claimed discrimination by his school and school board, as his case made its way to the Supreme Court of the United States. While the briefs included narratives and stories, very few were first person accounts from the students themselves. There was a single account from a first-grade transgender student in the findings where the child indicated that they did not feel comfortable in the boys' bathroom but were not allowed in the girls' bathroom, so they chose instead to hold themselves all day until they could relieve themselves at home.

As such, the literature indicates that the perception of many educators and parents alike is that there are barriers, such as bathroom use, in schools for elementary transgender students (Lewis & Eckes, 2020). Further, educators play an important role in being open to learning about

transgender students, changing their practice to be more gender affirming, and partnering with parents or guardians to support individual students (Goldstein et al., 2018; Neary, 2018). Additionally, transgender students and their peer allies can work together to create classroom or school climates that support a full spectrum of gender identities and expressions (Mackenzie & Talbott, 2018). However, as noted by Neary (2018), without greater inclusion of the direct voices of transgender children, “there is an important experience missing here” (p. 438). Mitra (2015) corroborates that student voice is critical in educational research and policy making, moving the students from simply being recipients of guidelines and practice created by adults to being allowed a voice at the table as they are being developed. Given that research on elementary transgender students is relatively limited in comparison to their older peers, with so little focused on their educational experiences as illustrated by their own stories and nuanced observations, there is a need to consider future projects that truly center their voices, providing them the opportunity to influence how they are perceived and illuminate how they are impacted by decisions made almost solely by adults, often in the belief that those choices are in the best interests of the children involved.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Introduction and Overview

This study seeks to close a gap in the research literature regarding elementary transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming (GNC) students and their experiences with school, focusing on these research questions: How do transgender, non-binary, and GNC elementary-aged students experience and navigate “schooling” in a mid-Atlantic state (MAS)? What do these students reveal as support systems? What do these students identify as barriers? This chapter will provide details about the study participants, design, data collection, analysis, ethical considerations, and limitations. Given that the research questions focused on understanding, versus quantifying, the experiences of elementary transgender students and, as stated by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), “assumes that reality is socially constructed” (p. 9), qualitative methods are the most appropriate. The study is a basic, or descriptive, qualitative study, seeking to discover how elementary transgender students understand, construct, and make meaning from their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Sandelowski, 2000). A primary goal is to highlight the voices of the students themselves in the findings. In support of this aim, data collection will be completed in such a way as to be able to provide readers with as much narrative and description as possible (Dawson, 2010).

Queer Theoretical Framework

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) state that “in critical inquiry the goal of the study in its findings or results is to critique and challenge, to transform, and to analyze power relations” (p. 59). This study seeks to understand the perspectives of a marginalized population within the context of the dominant culture, that being students who are in a gender minority given their identification as transgender, non-binary, and GNC. Queer theory, rooted in the works of Butler

(1990) and Wittig (1997), challenges the idea of strict binaries for identity markers such as gender and sexuality, for example male-female and heterosexual-homosexual. Sedgwick (2008) acknowledges that even within these socially constructed identity markers “people...may still be different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species” (p. 22). Further, the complex intersections of sex, gender, and sexuality allow for an infinite number of unique identities that blur the lines of power and dominance in a given moment or situation. Thus, the theory itself provides for gender and sexuality to be both intricate, with unbounded possibilities of expression, as well as fluid, meaning that these identities can shift and change over the lifespan of an individual.

In terms of power, queer theory attempts to create greater equality for sexual and gender minorities. While queer theory focuses on those who may be on the margins of society, there are differing views of how best this might be accomplished. On the one hand, writers such as Cohen (1997) advocate to change the very structure of society and what is viewed as typical in terms of sexual and gender practice, challenging current standards and binaries such as “male” and “female.” Others state that queer theory is not necessarily a repudiation of normativity, but rather seeks a way to expand the concept of what is deemed “normal” within the full range of gender and sexual expressions (Namaste, 1994; Rasmussen et al., 2014). Either way, the maintenance of heteronormative and sexist norms is scrutinized and challenged with a goal of redistributing power, both for the individual and for institutions. With regards to how persons who identify as transgender are situated within queer theory, Namaste (1996) cautions against seeing them as simply imitations of either male or female gender-identities. Rather, it is important to acknowledge that those who identify as transgender, non-binary, or other terms are themselves unique and expand rather than impersonate existing gender paradigms. To this point, Rasmussen

et al. (2014) stated that queer theory gains movement from “new perspectives” (p. 345). Further, Mitra (2015) extends that student voice is critical in educational research and policy making, moving the students from simply being recipients of guidelines and practice created by adults to being allowed a voice at the table as they are being developed, potentially helping to reframe decisions made by those in power. Lastly, queer theory is viewed not simply as a critical analytic framework, but one that also involves action through advocacy and coalition building in order to support liberation from heteronormativity (Rasmussen et al., 2014; Wimberly, 2015).

As such, the queer theoretical framework supports an analysis that looks specifically to illuminate the individualized identities of transgender, non-binary, and GNC students within the context of their schools and community. It is important to situate the research participants within the larger LGBTQ movement, but also to presume that there is nuance in each individual’s experience. Moreover, the analysis is guided by an examination of existing heteronormative dominant structures and practices, both implicit and explicit. By searching for and highlighting these power differentials, they may be brought to light for examination and disruption. Additionally, given the role of action in queer theory, areas of advocacy or community building are stressed as part of the analysis. It is through the provision of counternarratives from transgender, non-binary, and GNC students that this study seeks to challenge the stories and norms perpetuated by those in the gender majority.

Positionality

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that in research that is grounded in critical theory, such as queer theory, “the assumption is that power relations are everywhere, including in the research study itself” (p. 62). As such, throughout the study attention was given to my position as the researcher in relationship to the study participants, particularly with regards to my insider and

outsider status with this population. As a gay man, I consider myself as a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) community, falling under the umbrella of a sexual and gender minority. However, within that larger category, I do not myself identify as transgender or non-binary, and no one within my immediate household identifies as such at this time. I do have extended family who currently identify as transgender, and as such have observed over a number of years that adolescent's own identity development and engagement with school, as well as the journey of their parents as they have come to understand their child's identity. As such, I went into the study bringing a perspective of a partial insider, that being a member of the LGBTQ community as well as having personal experiences with a transgender extended family member and their parents. However, I also reflected upon the fact that while I was an insider on the periphery, I was also not inside the inner or core circle of the transgender community. Thus, while my LGBTQ identity gave me connections to a wide network across the MAS and allowed me introductions to transgender spaces, it did not confer upon me automatic access to those places. Moreover, because I was seeking entry into the spaces of transgender children and their parents or guardians, I believe there were added layers of caution and concern on the part of potential participants. Parents or guardians are naturally protective of their children, and because of issues of misunderstanding, discrimination, and even violence against transgender persons, this group was likely doubly so. Thus, while I entered into the study with a lens into the experiences of the community, I was also very much looking in through a window versus being immersed in the scene. I was a partial or perhaps even full outsider amongst the tightly knit transgender family community.

There were other insider-outsider identities which likely engaged with the research. I myself am a father to a current five-year old, with over a year of parenthood and childcare done

in the midst of a massive health pandemic and have a great deal of empathy for all parents or guardians. As such, I understand the instinctual need to protect and support your child with the skills and information you have. Moreover, I also understand how as a parent one is constantly second-guessing themselves, wondering if what you did was the right thing for your child, particularly given the amount of noise in the media about what that “right” thing might be. These messages are often contradictory in nature. This particular insider status contrasts with the outsider status of being an educational administrator who has been highly involved over the last several years in supporting students, staffs, and families regarding the implementation of policy or case-by-case supports for transgender students. I myself am a front-row observer and actor in how policy and practice have shifted over the last ten years in the MAS with regards to how schools address these issues. Moreover, I was aware that parents or guardians and students might view me in a certain light, directly dependent upon their own interactions with school and district officials as they have addressed their own situations. For one family whose administrators or schools provided positive action and support, I could have been seen as an ally, and yet for another who felt challenged in their interactions with school officials I might be met with suspicion. This is also an area where power dynamics could certainly be at play, given that school officials are the ones who are often making decisions about whether a student is able to use certain facilities that align with their gender identity or who support a teacher in ensuring that the correct names and pronouns are used. Additionally, my White racial identity and middle-class socio-economic identity provided me with insider status with similarly identified populations, and would have placed me as an outsider in other racial, ethnic, and socio-economic communities.

Overall, perhaps the greatest power dynamic was that of the researcher over the subject. I felt a great weight of responsibility in working to collect and review the data in a way that centered the students' voices as much as possible. While objectivity is not an aim of critical research through queer theory, my goal was to be aware of how my own experiences, history, and core values and beliefs might interact with the data and cause influence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). My own history of growing up as a gay adolescent in a minor city in the Midwest, having been bullied at times and having had a profound feeling of neither fitting in with male and female peers was always at risk of finding its way into the narrative of the students in this study. Throughout the research process, to include reflection and the research journal, my own personal identity and history, power dynamics, and the tensions of insider-outsider statuses were constantly reviewed and considered against the emergent narratives of the research participants.

Research Sample

This study took place in a MAS. In terms of demographics, the MAS has a total population of around 8.6 million people, with around 22 percent being of school-age, 18 years-old or younger (Census Reporter, n.d.; U.S. Census, n.d.). Parts of the MAS are also some of the wealthiest in the country, with three jurisdictions holding the top median incomes in the U.S., contributing to a total of five cities or counties within the top fifteen (U.S. News Staff, 2020). Much of the population in the state is clustered around three metropolitan areas, one in the northern part of the state, one in the center, and one on the coast (Cubit, n.d.). Individuals in the MAS tend to have higher levels of education when compared to other states. Overall, the MAS is 61% White, 19% Black, 10% Hispanic, 7% Asian, and 2% Two or More Races (Census Reporter, n.d.).

The site was chosen for several reasons. First, it is the state in which the researcher resides and works, so there existed a deep understanding and knowledge of how education policy was developed and implemented at the state level, particularly around LGBTQ youth. Additionally, the researcher had a knowledge of current events related to transgender students in schools within the MAS over a number of years, providing an understanding of how changes have occurred over time with policy and practice. Finally, the MAS has had a number of high-profile legal cases related to the rights of transgender students within schools, making it a location that has been saturated with information about transgender students in schools, creating awareness and causing transformation across large and small communities alike.

The study employed purposeful sampling in order to be able to gain information about the experiences from a specific and targeted population (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Snowball sampling was also an option in the study design in order to allow for research subjects or local organizations to share the study with potential participants. As such, this study initially sought five to ten children who identified as transgender, non-binary, or GNC, as well as at least one of their parents or guardians. In order to balance the focus of the study on elementary-aged students with developmental considerations of this age group with regards to consent and their ability to engage in sustained interviews, the students were required to be in either the fourth or fifth grade and enrolled in public or private school in the MAS during the 2020-21 school year. While the children were the main focus of the research, their parents or guardians were also asked to participate for the purposes of providing additional context on their child's responses.

Research subjects were recruited through the researcher's personal and professional social media accounts, as well as through connections with LGBTQ organizations, transgender parent organizations, and counseling organizations located in the MAS. Flyers and recruitment

emails were provided to the targeted organizations to share with their membership and were also shared on social media. Verbal informed consent from both the student and parent or guardian was given by all participants as required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Recruitment took place between January and July of 2021, and eventually included engagement with a transgender parent Facebook group, multiple advertisements through the social media platforms of Twitter and Facebook, as well as several personal connections between school counseling professionals in the MAS and individual families whom they knew and whom they felt met the study criteria to ensure they were aware. Despite these regular and repeated efforts over the seven months, only two participants that met the study criteria came forward to participate.

Participant Information: Alexis and Jennifer, Emma and Penelope

The two sets of participants, which each include the student and a parent, were from different parts of the MAS. Both sets of participants were White and would be considered middle-class from a socio-economic perspective. The first participants, Alexis and her mother, Jennifer, were from a large school division in the highly populated northern part of the MAS, considered a suburb of a major metropolitan area. This school division implemented a transgender-specific policy in the fall of 2020, adding to their existing nondiscrimination policy that was inclusive of gender identity. Alexis was in fifth grade at the time of the interview and identified as female, using the pronouns she and her. She was attending her school virtually at the time of her interview. The second participants, Emma and her mother, Penelope, were from a small district located in the southern part of the state. While rural, the second participants' town was close to a large state university. Their school division had not yet implemented any transgender-specific policy or policy language outside of the inclusion of gender identity in their

nondiscrimination policy. Emma was in the fourth grade at the time of the interview and identified as non-binary, using the pronouns zie and zir. Zie attended zir local public school during the 2019-20 school year and began the 2020-21 school year virtually, but eventually transitioned to home schooling as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research Design

The study took place from January through July of 2021, after approval through the IRB. As previously shared, participants were recruited from across the MAS by targeting LGBTQ organizations, transgender parent groups, counseling organizations, and through the use of the researcher's social media. Participants were selected if they met the eligibility requirements, those being that they attended a public or private school in the MAS, were in the fourth or fifth grade at the time of the interview, identified as transgender, non-binary, or GNC, and had parents or guardians that also agreed to participate. In order to incentivize participation, an offer of a donation to an LGBTQ organization was made. Parents were able to select their preference regarding the organization as part of the interview protocol.

Once participants were identified, the informed consent document was sent to the parents through email for their review ahead of the interview. At the start of the interview, consent was provided verbally from the parent or guardian after a review of the consent document by the researcher. The students also provided verbal consent, under the supervision of their parent, after a review of a separate consent form for minors.

Data Collection

Data was collected through interviews of the students as well as their parents. Interviews allow the researcher, as stated by Patton (2015), "to enter into the other person's perspective" (p. 426). Given that the research questions sought to explicitly understand the experiences of

elementary transgender students in school, the interview was the best method by which to enter the mind and world of the student as they directly described it. Moreover, interviewing the parents allowed a similar insight into their experiences of their child's world, providing additional context for their child's responses, and served as a means of triangulating the data through the addition of another source and perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While additional methods of data collection were considered to support trustworthiness in the research findings, such as the elicitation of photos or observations of the school environment, they were not deemed appropriate given that the research questions truly attempted to hone in on the unique lens of the elementary students. To add other data sources risked subverting or minimizing their experiences through the added weighting of adult perceptions, particularly when viewed through the lens of the researcher. While certainly it is important to engage in rigorous research methodology, so too was it important to ensure that the voices of the students remained at the forefront and center of this study.

The students were interviewed first, for around 30 to 60 minutes, using a semi-structured interview protocol that included a review of the consent forms and affirmation of verbal consent prior to questioning. The student interview protocol focused on understanding their relationship with school to include adults and peers, and specifically on how they had navigated school as a transgender, non-binary, or GNC child. In order to ensure the physical and emotional safety of the children, parents were also able to be with their child during the student interview as a support. Following the student interview, parents were interviewed on their own for 30-60 minutes, again using a semi-structured interview process. The parent protocol focused on their perceptions and thoughts on what their child had shared, filling in additional detail and providing further context and perspective on their child's experiences of school. All interviews took place

through the Zoom video conferencing platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This was done to limit physical interactions in alignment with health and safety guidelines (CDC, 2021). The researcher was in a private space during the interviews and every effort was made to convey to the participants that they should also be in a private space where they could remain undisturbed for the duration of the interviews.

Confidentiality, Risks, and Benefits

All interviews were recorded, and the audio recordings were saved in a secure cloud platform. The interviews were then transcribed, and upon transcription all recordings of the interviews were destroyed. The transcriptions and data were all stored securely and were only accessible to the researcher. All people, places, and other identifiable information were deidentified through the assignment of pseudonyms in the interview transcripts and subsequent data analysis and writing. While every step was taken to reasonably protect the privacy of the participants during data collection, analysis, and reporting, there existed a very minimal risk that someone's identity still might be discerned in the research findings. Further, while the interview questions focused on the students' experiences of school, there was a risk that some discussions could bring up painful or traumatic past experiences, although this was deemed a minimal risk to the participants. To this end, the informed consent document for parents included a list of LGBTQ and mental health resources across the MAS in the instance they might be needed. Further, the researcher was a licensed mental health professional and certified as a school counselor and was thus trained in navigating emotional and distressing situations. Additionally, as part of the informed consent process, participants were made aware of their ability to refuse to answer questions or to withdraw at any point from the study should they wish. The benefits of participation included the students and parents contributing to research that could positively

affect other transgender, non-binary, or GNC students across the U.S. Jones et al. (2016) found this type of advocacy to be empowering and supportive of these students' development of self-identity.

Analysis

Transcripts were initially coded in order to find emergent patterns, constantly comparing coded text in search of connections and variances. This initial coding was done using the open-source coding software, Taguette. On initial readings, categories seemed to center on specific actors within the lives of the students, as highlighted in a researcher journal entry on September 12, 2021:

Just finished the first coding of my second interview. I'm potentially interested in specific themes, but a bit worried that they seem to be centered on specific participants in the systems (self, peers, parents, policy) versus broader categories that cut across the specific groups. I'll need to go back through the first interview to see if, after reflection, these continue to make sense or if I might want to restructure them based on concepts such as fear, advocacy, impacts of non-support, etc.

At this stage, it was helpful to re-ground the analysis in queer theory, thus searching for information regarding the student and families' engagement with heteronormative power structures, information on how their individual nuanced identities experienced school, how action manifested itself in their lives, and opportunities for institutional change. As such, individual lines of text were assigned categories, such as "Self-Identity/Pride/Student Voice" when the students indicated being proud of an aspect of their gender identity, or "Staff Ability/Training" when there were discussions around the types of education staff members had on issues of gender identity:

EMMA: Well I wanted other people to know my pronouns and to acknowledge it. *[Self-Identity/Pride/Student Voice]*

JENNIFER: But the fact that that was like something that I would have to teach the principal. I was like “Did you not get diversity training on this?” You know what I mean? That was surprising to me and I was frustrated and could not keep my frustration from showing in that moment. *[Staff Ability/Training]*

Transcripts were reviewed to update categories and seek alignment across the interviews.

Following the initial coding, the data, to include the quotes and its assigned codes, were exported to a Microsoft Excel document in order to view the various text and categories together. Additional analysis was done at this stage to provide focus and combine some of the categories assigned through initial coding. For example, a section of text had been assigned the code, “Explaining: Timing,” as it referenced students’ preferences as to what time during the school year they preferred sharing their gender identity:

EMMA: I was comfortable with telling the friends who stuck by me. Because like most of the friends I tell know something’s different about me, but they never say anything because they don’t want to bring it up or something like that...until I feel comfortable telling them. *[Explaining: Timing]*

This was one of only two passages assigned this category. Upon review, the coded text better aligned with a larger category of “Time/Place” that had emerged and was thus reassigned.

Once this additional review of coding was completed, there were nine categories accounted for in the data. These nine categories were then written on Post-It notes in order to be able to physically manipulate them and visualize their relationships. This was done with the goal of establishing overarching themes that synthesized and organized the findings to better

understand how the students interpreted and made meaning of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldaña, 2016). This movement of the Post-It notes was tracked physically but also through the use of analytic memos, such as the one below from November 23, 2021:

Trying to play with the categories. Having written them out there are too many places with overlap. Considering collapsing into the below:

1. Student Experience
 - a. Exhaustion/Tokenism
 - i. Peers
 - b. Self-Knowledge & Growth
2. School Practices
 - a. Education and Training
 - b. Fulfilling the Promise of Policy
 - c. Practices
 - i. Time and Place
3. Additional Resources
 - a. Parent Advocacy
 - b. Finding Your People

The synthesis of categories into themes continued until the resulting three themes emerged: internal experiences of school, school practices, and non-school supports.

With the three themes outlined, the writing of the findings began. As part of the writing process, some categories were reassigned. For example, “Resources” had at one point originally been assigned under the theme of “internal experiences of school.” However, through writing it became apparent that the vast majority of resources were accessed as part of the school day,

whether they were individual people, such as a school counselor, or materials, such as books.

Positionality also figured into decisions regarding the writing of the findings, as considered in a researcher journal entry on November 7, 2021:

I've been thinking more about my positionality as a researcher, specifically my outsider status with the transgender community and then also as a parent. I was reading Tressie McMillan Cottom's collection of essays, *Thick*, and considering how as someone who is White I will never have a true understanding of what it is to be Black in this country, and how that inhibits my ability sometimes to miss blind spots or consider how my actions might negatively impact others...I am wondering if this is the case with the T of LGBTQ. It's interesting that we [LGBTQ people] are all grouped together under this umbrella, and there is a connection in that none of us fall into line with Western gender norms and expectations. However, there are also a lot of differences between sexual versus gender minorities, and I wonder if there are simply limitations to ally/conspirator understandings...I wonder about those of us in the cisgender community and whether or not we are making the space and community for those in the gender fluid community to the extent we need to.

This reflection of outsider status influenced the writing of the findings in such a way as to include the voices from the participants to the highest extent possible. This did not supplant the need for deeper analysis and discussion of their statements, but in this study it is most often found after direct quotes from the students and parents are shared. Additionally, the analysis and discussion were initially conducted in such a way as to highlight the voices of the students given their lack of representation in much of the research literature. However, upon the completion of the initial draft, a review found that rich information from the parents was lacking. For example,

both parents discussed the deep fears that they had for their children when they were in schools, providing context for how they perceived the environment to which they sent their children every day. Yet, that subcategory was not in the initial draft of the findings. This data was added in subsequent drafts in order to paint a clearer picture of the totality of experiences for the reader.

Ethical Considerations

There were ethical concerns as it pertains to the confidentiality of students, their schools, and their families. As required by the IRB, informed consent was solicited from the students and their parents. Given that the age of the students made them particularly vulnerable as research subjects, parents were able to be with their children during all interviews to ensure their students' interests and safety. Additionally, given that this research focused on a sensitive and vulnerable population, it was important to acknowledge the innate power imbalance between researchers and their subjects, particularly in interviews (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, this further extended to the reporting of the results, where the researcher had a responsibility to convey the understandings and perceptions of the subjects as faithfully as possible. As previously stated, transcripts were shared with participants to provide an opportunity for feedback with a goal of ensuring that any quotes and paraphrases were shared as they had intended. Further, contrasting and contradictory findings were considered in the study in order to reflect the differing perceptions that are an indicator of strong qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Finally, an identified personal ethical dilemma was around remaining open to information from the participants that did not necessarily align with the researcher's experiences as a sexual minority. Through active reflection, the researcher worked to minimize and be transparent as to how their own lens shaped potential findings. For example, the following is from a researcher journal entry on January 20, 2021:

What was surprising to me was the lack of connection to the adults in the building. The parent was highly complementary of the teacher last year who changed pronouns from they/them to she/her without missing a beat, but in the world of the student it was her peers that were most important for having a successful year. I wonder about the power of peer support with this age group and if that is a critical finding that may be born out with other research subjects.

Here, the student was finding support from their peers versus the adults in their school. The researcher's experience of schooling was the exact opposite, where they found higher levels of support from school staff and teachers then from their classmates, some of whom were repeatedly unkind. Yet, it was essential to follow the line of questioning and inquiry for future interviews and analysis as dictated by the student referenced above versus the researcher's personal history. An additional example can be found from an analytic memo from November 7, 2021:

The other item I was considering today as I was organizing the outline was this concept of developing pride in themselves. Both students, through engaging in groups outside of school, such as an LGBTQ playgroup or camp experience, developed a sense of pride in who they were and their identity. It moves from a place of being something unknown to each of them to being something that instills confidence in them and gives them a sense of purpose.

Here the students are expressing pride in their gender identity and making connections with other transgender, non-binary, and GNC peers in their community. Being out as "gay" and connecting with other gay peers was not something the researcher would have ever considered in high school, let alone elementary school, not the least of which would have been for safety reasons.

However, for these students their sense of self, pride, and connections with other gender fluid individuals was a key part of their discussions and subsequent analysis. Thus, having had their own negative experiences in school as a gender non-conforming gay child in a small midwestern school system, being critically mindful of this background and how it could lead to incorrect conclusions was important to the researcher throughout the study. The use of a researcher journal, analytic memos, and consultation with a faculty advisor assisted in minimizing this dilemma.

Trustworthiness: Validity, Reliability, and Transferability

Hays and Singh (2012) proposed that trustworthiness in the methodology, analysis, and reporting be established through a variety of strategies. Validity, or credibility, and reliability, or consistency, was addressed in this study through several means. Because the study relied solely upon the interviews of the individual participants, transcripts were shared with participants for review as discussed by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), to ensure that those studied could “recognize their experience in [my] interpretation” (p. 246). While a single data method was selected for the study, that being interviews, there were two sources of data, that from the students and that from the parents. In this way, the parents were able to provide context and reflection upon what their child had shared, helping to triangulate the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Additionally, regular engagement in self-reflection throughout the data collection and analysis process was undertaken by the researcher, with positionality and reflexivity incorporated into the research findings (Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). With the researcher as the research and evaluative instrument, there was a responsibility to disclose personal biases and relevant background as it related to the research topic so that readers were then able to understand the lens of interpretation. Likewise, in a qualitative approach it was important to bracket, or suspend, these

biases to the extent possible in order to allow the essence of the participants' experiences to rise unclouded from the data (Moustakas, 1994). Further, throughout the research process it was essential to scrutinize how the initial positionality of the researcher affected the examination of the data as it was collected in order to ensure transparency.

Through the inclusion of a research journal and analytic memos, an audit trail of the research findings was maintained (Bowen, 2005; Hays & Singh, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Lastly, detailed description was used throughout the reporting of the research findings, both to ensure that the narratives of the participants were told clearly, but also to allow readers to ascertain if there was enough similarity to their own situation to make the findings potentially transferable (Bowen, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that "the extent to which a study's findings apply to other situations [is] up to the people in those situations" (p. 256). In order to assist readers in making that determination, the data was reported in a way to evoke clear scenes and portraits.

Limitations and Delimitations

COVID-19 Pandemic

Perhaps the largest limitation to be discussed is that of conducting this research in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the nature of widespread community closures, the movement of all non-essential activities to virtual formats, and the added social, emotional, and logistical burdens placed upon families, recruitment of participants was extremely challenging. In a blog post about qualitative research during the pandemic, Ravitch (2020) corroborated these challenges, one of which was the issue of participants finding the time necessary to be able to participate given the additional stressors at play in every person's life. Rahman et al. (2021) further discussed the impact of multiple competing priorities during COVID-19 in the lives of

potential research subjects as a challenge. Given the fact that for much of the 2020-21 school year parents or guardians were liable to be working from their homes at the same time that their children were likely to be attending school at home, families were left with “information and emotional overload” (p. 6). As such, recruitment efforts for this study were potentially stymied due to many families feeling overwhelmed and unable to add an additional something elective, such an interview to participate in a research study, to their schedules. One adjustment that had to be made after several months of recruitment efforts was to expand the scope of the study from a specific region of the MAS to the entire MAS itself. The original goal of the study was to support greater transferability by keeping the participants in the same general area of the MAS, with similar policies, political leanings, and socio-economic factors. However, in order to gain additional participants, the study was expanded across the MAS after a few months. Thus, the data reflects the experiences of two students, and yet it must be acknowledged that the specific contexts for each of the students’ experiences were different.

Additionally, this study gathered data through exclusively online or virtual methods instead of through an in-person format as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. While the use of video conferencing tools for data collection in interviews was not new, the pandemic provided opportunities to highlight the ethical considerations regarding informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, and how the recordings and other data might be stored (Lobe et al., 2020). Roberts et al. (2021) discussed that while virtual communication platforms allowed for interviews during COVID-19, it was not always possible to establish and build relationships with vulnerable communities in order to support recruitment efforts. For those populations that traditionally live at the margins of society, which includes the LGBTQ community, it is often necessary to build rapport and gain trust through in-person interactions prior to collecting data

for research. Given that this was not possible during the 2020-21 school year, the inclusion of parents in the interview space itself with their child was done intentionally in order to better create an environment where the students felt safe and supported, and as a result more comfortable sharing. In this way, the students were able to rely upon their parent for reassurance and emotional safety during the interviews, and the parents were able to be more comfortable with participating knowing that they would be a party to all discussions between the researcher and their child.

Rahman et al. (2021) considered what would then be needed on the part of researchers in order to address challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. They recommended that researchers consider pausing research if necessary, prioritize their own mental and physical health as well as that of their research team, and remain open to flexibility or adaptation within their research study structure. This could mean anything from changing to goals of a particular study to fit the context of a crisis situation to planning for and addressing changes in the quality or amount of data collected. As has been detailed, there were amendments made to the original IRB to address recruitment challenges, and ultimately the findings were established based upon two participants, falling short of the goal of having five. Overall, the pandemic changed the landscape for both researchers and their potential subjects across all research areas, forcing amendments and concessions in order to move projects forwards (Ravitch, 2020). This study was no exception.

Additional Limitations

The recruitment of participants occurred through social media or through existing support groups for parents or guardians of transgender children. As such, this limited the scope of participants in a few ways. First, only those families who were engaged with social media and

then with those accounts associated with a targeted LGBTQ organization would have potentially seen the opportunity to engage with the study, limiting the potential audience. Further, the organizations that support parents or guardians of transgender children were those that affirm their identities. As such, the parents who would likely have been aware of the study opportunity were those that were supportive of their child's identity and were able to connect with support organizations. This could have left out those children who identified as transgender, non-binary, or GNC and whose parents or guardians were less supportive or unsupportive of their child's identity, or those parents or guardians who were simply not engaged with the support organizations. Additionally, the lack of representation of LGBTQ families of color in the research literature has been discussed (Brainer et al., 2020). For this study, both sets of participants were White, and therefore do not represent the experiences of transgender children of color or their families.

Delimitations

The study was bound intentionally in several ways. As the focus was on better understanding the world view of elementary-aged students, the focus was on those students in the upper grades, specifically fourth and fifth grade. The purpose for seeking out older participants was two-fold. First, the goal was to have students who met the aims of the study who also were the most developmentally able to understand and give consent as participants. Secondly, the older students were more likely to be able to engage in longer discourse through an interview and provide more elaborate responses. This would have been more challenging with younger students.

Additionally, participants were limited to those students whose parents could also participate. Given that the study was based solely on interview data, parent interviews were

added to supplement the student interviews in order to be able to provide additional context and insight into the responses of the students. The parent interviews also help to serve as a means of triangulation of the data sources. Thus, if a student's parents were not interested in participating themselves, they would not have been eligible for the study.

The location of the study was also limited, as was referenced above, to a single MAS. Given that education policy is the purview of the states, it was important to maintain at least a state-level site, as the experiences of students from state-to-state are likely to be quite different based upon legislative, judicial, and cultural differences. These differences can extend themselves into both policy and practice with regards to transgender students. While there are certainly variations into how transgender students are supported and treated across the regions of any U.S. state, they were anticipated to be less variable than those differences that might exist between students across several states.

CHAPTER 4: “THE SCHOOL HELPS ME TO UNDERSTAND, NOT REALLY OTHER PEOPLE UNDERSTAND”

For this study, two elementary transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming (GNC) students, Alexis and Emma, were interviewed. Alexis was in the fifth grade and Emma was in the fourth grade at the time the conversations took place in the early part of 2021. Alexis identified as female and used she/her pronouns, and Emma identified as non-binary and used zie/zir pronouns. In addition, their mothers, Jennifer and Penelope respectively, were present during the student interview portion and were also interviewed separately as part of the data collection. Alexis and Jennifer lived in the northern part of the mid-Atlantic state (MAS) in a densely populated suburban area, while Emma and Penelope lived in a rural area located in the southwestern part of the MAS. After the interviews of the students and parents were completed, the data was reviewed and coded. Three major themes emerged: Internal Experiences of School, School Practices, and Non-School Supports. Thus, what materialized was a journey of how the transgender, non-binary, and GNC students experienced themselves, their schools, and their communities. Moreover, it highlighted the interplay of these different environments on students' identity development and engagement in their schools.

As the title of the chapter alludes, a consistently running thread through the data is that of the students being viewed as a problem that needs to be solved versus schools and school divisions making an attempt to address, from a systemic level, how they might be able to alleviate the challenges encountered by transgender, non-binary, and GNC students. In other words, efforts were primarily spent on helping the student to adapt to the school or having a single class acclimate to the student instead of focusing on opportunities where the entire school environment could be established, from the very beginning, to support any transgender students

that might be present. Time and again, it was the students and families that were called upon to make accommodations and serve as the educators and teachers. To this effect, the burden of creating a positive school experience was heavily weighted on their shoulders.

“It Sometimes Feels Like I’m the Teacher at School”: Internal Experiences of School

It is first important to understand how the elementary transgender students experienced school from their own internal frame. What arose from the research was information on how they saw themselves and their own role within the classroom and school, as well as how they made meaning of their experiences. These understandings influenced the considerations around policies, practices, and resources that could provide the most support, as well as those that might inhibit or even harm these students.

Exhaustion & Tokenism

Exhaustion. The students in this study had a high level of knowledge as well as mastery of language regarding their transgender, non-binary, and GNC identities. They shared how exhausting it was for them to constantly share their identity with others and educate them on gender identity:

It feels—it feels like, it sometimes feels like I’m the teacher at school trying to tell all these, having to try to teach them ‘cause like no one knew what it was. (Alexis)

Well, it’s been challenging switching teachers and trying to explain it to a whole ‘nother group about who I am and then just doing that again and again and again. (Emma)

The amount of questioning is not the only factor, as the nature of the questioning can lend itself to the frustration on the part of the students:

But a lot of times this happens like, in the bus, or in the hallways, in a bathroom break.

Asking me, in classrooms. They’re asking me these questions and I’m like—I tell them.

And it's not like, "okay, but this." [as a response]. [Instead, it's] "But my mom said..."

...It's really hard to tell if someone's trying to argue with me or not. (Alexis)

It is important to note here that the student is trying to respond to questions that are often deeply personal regarding their identity to include names and pronouns, while at the same time trying to determine if the question is simple curiosity or something potentially more threatening. While prior qualitative research, such as that of Johnson et al. (2014), speaks to the experiences of older transgender students and their frustrations with the school environment, it does not address this idea of emotional exhaustion from constantly serving as their own student ambassador every day within the schools. Further, it does not reflect the specific experiences of elementary transgender identifying students. Goldstein et al. (2018) did find that a transgender student's teacher acknowledged the burden placed upon the students and families to educate the school about issues related to gender identity, and though the study did not include the direct voice of the students to really expand upon the impact of this responsibility.

Identity Development. This strong sense of identity was developed in part with the support of their parents:

Sometime in third grade you [Alexis] started using they/them pronouns. And was very definitely clear that you were not a boy, but maybe hadn't arrived yet on the "I'm definitely a girl." When we kind of decided, she sort of fully came out as being transgender in December or January of last year...in January, social transition, shopping in the girls' department at Target, using she/her [pronouns]. (Jennifer)

Here Jennifer outlined how Alexis' female gender identity developed over time, and how she assisted by taking her daughter's lead, for example by taking her clothes shopping. Similarly, Penelope helped Emma explore zir non-binary identity:

We went through the pictures and mom's explaining every flag. And then we, and then

I'm like, "wait!" at the gender fluid flag...she told me neither boy or girl. (Emma)

Thus, Penelope was reading books to her child about gender identity, and it was one of these books that served as a catalyst for Emma to understand her own non-binary identity. This style of identity development in young transgender children aligns with that found by Olson et al. (2019) where discovery and decisions around transitions, names, and pronouns were firmly driven by the students, with the parents serving as facilitators of support, assisting to help ensure as smooth a path as possible.

Peers. Friends were seen to be helpful in taking on some of the burden of inquiries about the participants' gender identity:

...I feel like it's mostly just me, except when my friends are with me....it's just more that when someone's asking...they don't ask anyone else questions about like any of this stuff. They would come directly to me. But like if my friend was there, it would be different. I feel it would be different—I just wish they could go over to my friend and ask them. It's just rude... If someone asks me a question when I'm standing in line with my friend, my friend will usually step in. (Alexis)

Moreover, their friends were critical supports when other students treated them poorly or began to abandon them:

They helped me build up more courage to tell more people, and they were really nice through the bad times, when people started [to] stop hanging out with me. (Emma)

These friends were described as having a knowledge of what LGBTQ was, which allowed them to serve as allies to their transgender peers. Some of this was due to the efforts of Emma and Alexis' parents, who reached out to the families in their child's network and specifically asked

them to make efforts to speak with their children about the transgender status of their kids. These peers-as-allies not only intervened with other students, but also with teachers:

I had [Ms. Paschal, the art teacher] when I went by a different name. And I'm like—it was everyone writing in the chat—"I was in your class last year." She was like, "Alexis? I don't remember Alexis." And then Josh said that I used to go by Greg and now use she/her and that was really like—I don't think I could have done that myself...it was just like—you know how like a relaxation thing you do is tense up and then you release it? That's kinda what it felt like. (Alexis)

In addition to peers, siblings were also noted as critical allies to these students in school.

When they answered questions about their identity, negative peer reactions also had an impact on the students:

Sometimes it's hard to take it in that people act different and do different stuff and acknowledge you in a different way than others...So, when I told one of my friends, they started ignoring me and trying to avoid me more often than they would other people. (Emma)

In one instance, peers refused to accept Alexis' assertions about her own female gender identity:

I still remember this one time where I'm like, "Hey, I'm a girl now" to this person. And they're like, "I don't think so. Let me ask the bus patrol." ... [I was telling them about] myself, my identity. I'm telling someone. And they're asking someone who barely knows me about my identity. And they're refusing my identity because someone I, some random sixth grader said that it wasn't.

In essence, Alexis was denied agency over her own identity and person, and an older student in a position of authority, a bus patrol, was sought out instead to provide the final word as to her

gender. Prior research on peers shows that LGBTQ student groups, such as gender-sexuality alliances (GSA), can have a positive impact on transgender students, but those student clubs are almost exclusively at the secondary level and do not address the specific impact of peer actions across the school on transgender student experiences (Greytak et al., 2013). Moreover, there is a great deal of information about the impact of negative peer relationships on transgender and GNC students, such as bullying and harassment, but very little emphasis has been spent on how positive peer interactions may affect their experiences (Clark et al., 2014; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Johnson et al., 2014; McGuire et al., 2010; Sausa, 2005). Even when positive peer relationships are addressed, it is often presented as the converse of negative data, where more supportive peers provide fewer harmful behaviors and outcomes. Moreover, this information lacks the depth described by Alexis and Emma in this study (Jones et al., 2016).

Timing. Timing was also discussed as important, with Emma stating that she preferred sharing her non-binary gender identity in the middle of the year:

...because then I actually know who my friends are...I wanted to wait until the middle of the year because I wanted to know who I was comfortable telling.

Because of their experiences with negative reactions from peers, to include dismissing their asserted identities, it is logical that transgender students would want to build trust with friends ahead of sharing their asserted identities. Similar to the findings of Olson et al. (2019), here the students took an active role in making choices about their transitions in the school.

Moreover, it was not only the students, but the parents that expressed frustration with having to explain their child's gender identity multiple times to schools, particularly as part of transitioning to a new school:

So there's a really good chance that we're about to have to start this whole process over at a middle school, and start once again feeling out, "what teachers can we trust? What is the administration like, are there any school counselors that are going to be receptive?"

(Penelope)

But now I just feel like, when I, you know, meet like open house or whatever, it's gonna be a conversation that I have before the school year even starts. And kind of laying out my expectations, like "You will use her pronouns and her name." (Jennifer)

As they share above, not only is it frustrating to continuously revisit the same conversations each year with teachers and school staff, but there is a certain level of anxiety that goes along with worrying about how the student's identity will be received by the school. In addition, there are no guarantees that even when requests are made around such items as pronouns and names that they will be respected. While the teacher in Goldstein et al. (2018) acknowledged the burden placed upon the families of transgender and GNC students, here the voices of the parents are able to confirm and expound upon that responsibility.

Self-Knowledge and Growth

Self-Awareness. Another striking aspect regarding these students was their level of self-awareness, introspection about their identities, and what they had learned about themselves through their identity formation and coming-out process:

...the bad stuff that happened in school helped me know what to do and how to feel if someone didn't respect who I was. (Emma)

But also, you know now Emma's been in this for three years now, zie is like the wizened, the one giving advice and that makes a big...that's very empowering. (Penelope)

In this way, the students built confidence in their identities to the point that they saw they had something to give to others based upon their experiences and what they had learned as a result. Further, it was also about how they had come to see themselves amongst the larger LGBTQ and transgender community:

I was saying like if they didn't understand, they would think I am a role model for all trans people. But there are many, many different kinds...just because someone else said something to you once doesn't mean that's true for all people and me. (Alexis)

Additionally, finding the language and construct that spoke to their identity helped move them from a place of being “stuck” to thriving:

Well, before I knew who I was, I was having some trouble at school, I was falling way behind on reading. And I was a lot more stressed out and sad when I came to school more often. We went to a therapist, and she suggested I had alone time for like an hour, every end of the day. And it was like that for at least two months, and I just started getting sadder and more stressed, and all of that, until the [I Am] Jazz book. (Emma)

Once Emma had seen herself in books about transgender and non-binary children, both Zie and Penelope shared that it was a much smoother road forward, with improvement emotionally and academically.

Action and Advocacy. This newfound sense of self became a source of pride, one that manifested itself in action on the parts of the students, such as through advocacy with their local school board. Given the new law in the MAS that required school divisions to enact a variety of supportive measures for transgender students, Emma chose to speak at a meeting (Treatment of Transgender Students; Policies, 2020):

[I chose to speak] to say that people are out there, and that the experiences that I've had were mostly not good and that they should really fix that.

In a similar vein, Jennifer shared that Alexis wanted to participate in this research project in part as a means of advocacy:

She was excited to talk to you because she's like, "This is something good I can do to help people."

As such, these students were looking beyond their own individual situations and circumstances and took it upon themselves to use their experiences and influence to better the lives of other transgender and non-binary students. This showed a high level of maturity on their part that extended beyond altruism for the transgender community and into other aspects of their lives:

I've always felt like the more mature one...since I stopped making fart jokes in third grade, I've felt way more mature than a lot of other people. (Alexis)

In one situation, Emma had a peer in second grade who identified as a tomboy and who had challenged Emma's assertions regarding zir non-binary identity. When discussing this peer, Emma referred to them as someone who had identified as a tomboy then, but shared that this did not mean that the peer continued to identify as a tomboy now:

This was second grade, and we've gone forward two years she could be...she could have changed identity by now. She could have gone from being a tomboy back to a girl or a boy. She could have gone from being a tomboy to trans or, you know, gender fluid if she finally found it out.

In this instance, Emma showed a strong awareness of the fluidity of gender, not only as it may apply to zirselves, but also as it may apply to zir peers. Further, even though this peer had been disparaging of Emma's identity, zie still thought to extend to them the possibility that they may

have shifted in their own language around their own gender identity and expression. This sense of concern for others can be found in McGuire et al. (2010), where the transgender students interviewed as part of the qualitative portion of the study were more concerned about the harassment of other transgender students than their own. Moreover, the importance of advocacy to the well-being of older transgender students is a key finding from Jones et al. (2016) where engaging with transgender groups and participating in activism created a sense of purpose grounded in a feeling of responsibility to improve the situation for transgender and GNC students overall.

Ownership of the Experience. The individual identities, self-awareness, and decisions to take ownership of their stories were something that did lead to compartmentalization on the part of both Alexis and Emma, where their parents were not aware of some of the issues and relationships at school. Jennifer was surprised when Alexis spoke so much about her positive peer relationships during the interview, culminating in the story where her peers helped to clarify her identity for the art teacher:

I didn't get the sense that she had this core group of friends. I knew it was like two friends who are both boys who have known her since kindergarten. (Jennifer)

Similarly, Penelope was surprised by the challenges Emma had faced with her peers regarding her non-binary identity:

I did not know, that was a lot more candid than I have heard Emma be about how other kids treated her in second grade when she was coming out. We knew that things had been awkward...but that was the most candid I've heard Emma be about people who kind of ghosted after they found out, and it's certainly the first time I've heard Emma talk about the friend who was a tomboy who, like just flat out invalidated that experience.

Thus, at least to some extent both students took on the weight of their identities themselves and shouldered its impact on their peer relationships, both positive and negative, without involving their parents in every nuanced interaction. In some respects, this supports the findings of Olson et al. (2019) where it is ultimately the children that make the decisions about their transition.

Both Alexis and Emma took on the ownership of managing their identity, their transitions, and their impact on their peer relationships, to the point that their families were unaware of some of the details surrounding these interactions.

“That kid is seen as a problem, and not as a person that has a right to be supported”:

School Practices

The students and families interviewed had a great deal to say about their experiences specific to school practice, not only with teachers but with administrators, school counselors, and local policy makers. As such, they discussed practices that worked well for them on the part of schools, and suggested opportunities for improvement based upon what they had learned.

Education and Training

School Staff. Overall, school staff had different levels of training or knowledge regarding transgender and non-binary students, and much of it appeared to be learning that took place only when they encountered these students and then through trial-and-error. Jennifer described an early incident with lunchboxes:

And on the very first day, they had to put like, “Okay, all the boys put your lunch boxes in this bin and all the girls put their lunchboxes on this bin.” And Alexis came home and actually told me that...so I sent an email to the teacher, being like, “Is there any other...?” And she wrote back immediately, she realized immediately that that was like, “Oops.”

It's how she had always done it, but I think she saw Alexis' face kind of fall. And she goes, "Don't worry, we're never doing that again."

Here, the gendered practice around the lunchboxes became salient for the teacher when confronted with a student who existed outside the gender binary, and thus called into question what was likely a longstanding practice. The teacher did immediately correct this practice.

Both Emma and Alexis had school staff that took it upon themselves to do their own learning on the topic of gender identity and transgender students once they became aware that they had these students in their midst. In one instance, a school counselor went to a variety of trainings to support Emma even though she was transitioning to a different school in three months' time. In other instances, teachers would take time to share what they were learning about gender constructs with these students, such as when Alexis' teacher spoke with her about the concept of "two-spirit" during a social-studies unit on Native Americans. School staff would even surprise these families, for example when a teacher of Emma's twin sister, identified as "more traditional, more conservative, more religious in every way," reached out to Penelope:

[The teacher] was assigned to do the remote teaching for the school year for third grade, and she came to me at the end of last summer and was putting together virtual bookshelves and she did do an entire virtual bookshelf on queer books, which you could have knocked me over with a feather. I was shocked that they allowed her to do it. I was shocked that she chose to do it, it wouldn't have surprised me if Emma's teacher had done it. But this is a completely different teacher, completely different beliefs, completely different everything, making that intentional decision....

Overall, school staff often lacked awareness and training, but by engaging with students who identified as transgender and non-binary it prompted many to take it upon themselves to learn

more, change practices, and seek out ways to be a resource. Jennifer shared that there are many resources out there and that staff have it within their power to educate themselves on transgender issues and practice.

Educating Students. Not only did the idea of staff training arise, but the need for student training also emerged, particularly as a response to the burden felt by these students to constantly be educating their peers and school staff regarding their identities. Alexis shared:

It would be super quick if there were like an LGBTQ class at school, kind of like the same as the sex ed class...why can't they just teach LGBTQ in there? I feel like if they're mature enough for [family life education] at that age, why aren't they old enough to understand what LGBTQ is?

She also had ideas that children's books could be a way to introduce these concepts, much the way that she learned about her own identity. This would help to alleviate some of the pressure she constantly felt to be the teacher:

I feel like people would—they wouldn't immediately come to me for all their questions about it...they could ask other people that took the [LGBTQ] class, at the same time...they would have time to talk about it with other people.

Thus, both the need for staff training and the inclusion of LGBTQ topics in school curriculum were brought forward by the students, aligning with prior research findings (Johnson et al., 2014; McGuire et al., 2010). As found by Greytak et al. (2013), supportive and educated staff and curriculum that is inclusive of LGBTQ topics and figures correlates to greater perceptions of positive experiences by transgender students. However, as discussed by Meyer et al. (2016), teachers reported varying levels of preparedness to address transgender student needs and mitigate issues such as transphobic bullying. While training aligns to the findings of prior

studies, it is important to note that here it is brought out specifically as a remedy to the burden transgender students feel in perceiving themselves to be the sole-source of information on gender identity, at nine years old, in their schools.

Fulfilling the Promise of Policy

While this study took place in a MAS that had developed statutory language for schools regarding how to support transgender students, there remained a chasm between policy development and implementation. For example, Alexis shared that she never used the bathroom in school, even though she technically had been given permission to use the girls' facilities. Jennifer later elaborated on this:

But what the principal said was “You definitely have the right to use whichever bathroom you use, but from my perspective as a principal who has to look out for everybody, I would prefer if you didn’t so that you don’t get teased or people don’t have questions for you or the other students aren’t uncomfortable.” And I was so mad that he said that, because I felt that he was saying, “You have the right to, but please don’t.”

Thus, while the principal clearly knew the policy and guidance from the school division, they chose to appeal to the student and family to consider what they perceived were the needs of the other students, placing their comfort above the needs of the individual transgender student. This resulted in a student who did not use the restroom facilities in their school for the remainder of that school year:

...she would run home from the bus stop. Like, run, to go to the bathroom. So, in my mind, I was like, “You had to go to the bathroom. There’s no way that just happened. Like I don’t know if you’re not drinking water during the day.” (Jennifer)

Overall, the policy implementation here made the students, not the school or the system, the problem:

Because the school does things about me, they don't do things about the other people asking questions...the school helps me to understand, not really other people understand (Alexis)

When a kid has a different gender identity, that kid is seen as a problem, and not as a person that has a right to be supported. (Penelope)

Thus, while the goal of policy, particularly at the state level, may be to make schools more welcoming and supportive environments for transgender students, the implementation at the local school level focuses on the single individual student versus considering if systemic changes might be needed to meet the spirit of the statute. Moreover, the students and families reported that there was a reticence to address this at the elementary level, that instead gender identity was seen as something that was addressed at the secondary level, serving in effect to deny the students their ability to know their own gender:

So the first thing she told us was that this was really a better decision to be made in middle school....it was very much a meeting that was, "This is primary school, we don't deal with this, we are going to do damage control you need to get your kid back in the closet, because this is going to cause a public outlash." (Penelope)

As discussed by Spillane et al. (2002), educational policy implementation is navigated through the complexity of multiple factors such as personal values, prior knowledges and experiences, as well as multiple interpretations of policy language. Thus, what is intended through the policy may look different in actual practice.

Additionally, the policy development process had its own challenges. For example, even with guidelines from the state, Emma's local school division created processes that effectively outed students by requiring multiple layers of notification if a student wanted accommodations such as changed pronouns or different facility access. Families were required to be notified in these instances without an allowance for the full consideration or context of a specific situation. Moreover, the policy could have been developed with a total absence of LGBTQ voices, and transgender voices specifically:

...no one on the committee was transgender...so [the committee] is just out of their depth and all the good intentions in the world can't get you, can't fix when you just don't know what you're doing. (Penelope)

This gap between the intention behind the policy and the practice of the policy itself can leave students and families feeling as if they must continuously fight against the school and school system in order to access the practices that respect and provide dignity to their children:

But if you're going to have an out kid in the schools, you are going to have to be prepared to fight it every step of the way. Because, at least in our experience, they're not going to give you anything. And even the things that are painless, like, who does it hurt to use pronouns? It's a lot of work, it's a huge amount of emotional labor that as a parent you try to take on because you don't particularly want your kid to have to be putting that in. (Penelope)

As highlighted by Meyer and Keenan (2018), even with mandates from the state, not all schools will develop policies that are consistent with the initial charge. Students' perceptions of their school having transgender inclusive policies, such as antibullying and harassment policies, do indicate more positive experiences for the students (Greytak et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2020).

However, as found by Leonardi and Staley (2018), implementation of transgender inclusive policies can vary widely, dependent upon the backgrounds and values of school administrators.

What Works

Student Placement. Through their experiences over several years with the schools, the participants were able to identify a number of practices that they felt were particularly supportive of their transitions and identity formation within the schools. Student placement, both in terms of peers and teachers, were seen as critical. This makes sense, given that at the elementary level students spend almost the entirety of their day in the same classroom with the same teacher and students. In one instance, the parent was proactive in requesting specific placements for her child:

But, and I never thought I would be the kind of parent to write a letter about class placement to the principals...but for her, I do. And I emphasize she needs to have friends and allies in her class. And that was honored by the school. (Jennifer)

In another instance, the school made a decision about placement that in the parent's perception was due to the minoritized status of the teacher:

They assigned Emma to the only Black elementary school teacher in the county. She's young, she's a Black activist, and she's amazing in every way and we love her. She [is] still one of Emma's best allies and best, best proponents, but they assigned Emma to the only Black elementary school teacher in the county, because this is a kid that's different, might as well give her the teacher that has some experience with difference. (Penelope)

The classroom makeup was not just something that the parents were concerned about, but it also influenced the students' comfort level. For example, Emma shared that zie preferred discussing zir non-binary identity in the middle of the year once zie had established relationships with the

other students in the class. Given that elementary students are generally in the same classroom space all day, every day of the week, it stands to reason that a supportive teacher and friendly peers would be a critical factor for these students and families.

Names and Pronouns. As part of the school and classroom culture, being referred to with the correct names and pronouns had a positive impact on the students. For Emma, it was complicated, as zir teacher had explicit instructions not to use Emma's preferred pronouns or acknowledge zir identity in the classroom. However, the teacher found ways to subvert the system:

Sometimes she did [use my pronouns], sometimes she didn't. The times she didn't, I couldn't blame her, because she didn't know she was allowed to...she uses my pronouns [one-on-one] and she also used them on my report card, and letters. (Emma)

So, if they had a one-on-one conversation, or if I went in for a parent-teacher conference, Ms. Johnson [Emma's teacher] would use the correct pronouns, but in a classroom setting she couldn't. (Penelope)

Here the teacher is working around the system to the extent possible in an effort to both keep her position but also validate the student's expressed identity as much as they are able. Meyer et al. (2015) discussed a similar phenomenon, where teachers from any marginalized group, not necessarily solely LGBTQ, were more sensitive to and aware of the issues and negative experiences faced by marginalized groups of students. Further, non-binary pronouns seemed to be more challenging for the schools. Jennifer felt like Alexis' school was relieved when Alexis changed from non-binary pronouns to female pronouns:

... [the principal] said a thing like, “Well, now that we can use she/her pronouns, that’s better. ‘Cause they/them—I really didn’t want any of my teachers modeling incorrect English.”

This implies that the issue with non-binary identities is one of language and correctness versus bias or lack of training and education. Allen et al. (2020) found that non-binary identified students reported slightly lower levels of teacher support than their transgender binary peers, but that research does not provide us with additional context regarding barriers related to the language. Pronouns and names also extended beyond the teacher and into the technology systems of the school divisions, where even if a name was changed in one system, it might not also have been updated in another, causing distress and additional work on the part of the family to contact the school and ask for a correction.

Gendered School Structures and Spaces. Another practice that emerged was the idea of breaking down the stark gender binary in schools. In some instances, this could be through facilities such as non-gendered restrooms or locker rooms. Jennifer acknowledged that one roadblock to transgender students using the facilities that corresponded to their gender identity is the fear of assault if transgender females are allowed in girls locker rooms:

The other thing I wish...the pushback with all of the [statewide policy] stuff specifically being about locker rooms and people saying, “I don’t want my daughter to be in a locker room and turn around and see a giant penis next to her.” And I’m like, “Okay, have you met a trans person? Probably they’re not shoving their penis in your face.” But also, just like people are talking about how traumatic and hard that phase of life is anyway and how hard bathrooms—you know, getting things like menstrual supplies, having to get naked

in a locker room. These things are hard for every child, and I wish we could make that easier for every child, not just the trans kids.

Prior research consistently discusses the challenges shared by transgender students with regards to being able to access facilities that correspond to their gender identity or provide them with a sense of safety, such as restrooms and locker rooms (Kosciw et al., 2020; McGuire et al., 2010; Sausa, 2005). Here, by creating non-gendered spaces that have more privacy overall, all students might be able to benefit during a developmental period of physical change and development.

Beyond terminology, the elimination of gendered groupings by staff was shared as something that could positively impact transgender students. Alexis shared an experience where students were instructed to line up by gender in order to receive instruction in family life education. Her suggestion was to change terminology from “boys and girls” to “assigned male at birth” or “assigned female at birth,” proactively acknowledging that there may be those that no longer identify with their sex assigned at birth. Sausa (2005) similarly found that older transgender students struggled with both gendered physical spaces as well as gendered groupings for events such as prom. Overall, the participants felt that the less gendered schools were, the easier it would be for not only for them, but for other students along the gender continuum.

Issues around specific places and spaces also arose as practice areas for consideration. One such place was the school bus, where students interacted with students from not just their own classroom, but from all over the school and across the age span. School buses are a place that students who identify as LGBTQ do sometimes avoid because of feeling unsafe (Kosciw et al., 2020). As was previously discussed, Alexis’ assertions about her identity were dismissed in deference to an older bus patrol. Emma faced harassment by her bus driver’s granddaughter, and since the granddaughter’s grandmother was the bus driver, there was no attempt to stop the

behavior. Overall, it was felt that there was little communication between the school and the bus driver regarding students' gender identity and the accompanying practices, at least not that was visible to the participants. Because of this environment, Jennifer began to drive Alexis to school, although not without some sense of loss:

It isn't that fun, but I definitely feel more comfortable, but it doesn't really feel like school...I didn't really like it so I want to go back to doing the bus. (Alexis)

With behaviors unchecked and information not well communicated, the students either faced environments that challenged their asserted identities or a choice to be driven to school, changing their school experience.

Additionally, as this research took place during widespread school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic, both students had an opportunity to engage with virtual schooling using platforms such as Zoom. This provided them with some degree of anonymity, as well as an opportunity to minimize the need to have multiple conversations about their identity with peers and teachers. It also gave them a chance to elect how to engage in discussions, whether through typing into a chat feature or taking surveys, as such preventing some of the risk of engaging verbally in front of the entire class. Virtual schooling assisted in creating a safer and less threatening environment. While prior research has not specifically examined the connection between virtual schooling and transgender students' feelings of safety and wellbeing, Grossman and D'Augelli (2006) did find that that students would seek new school environments until they found one that was supportive of their identity.

In-School Resources. Finally, there were several resources that were suggested as helpful in schools for transgender students. While many high schools and some middle schools have gender-sexuality alliances (GSA) as a student club, there are few at the elementary level.

The participants expressed that they might be helpful to connect LGBTQ students within the school and create a sense of community. Greytak et al. (2013) found that transgender students reported lower levels of bullying and harassment in schools that had a GSA at the secondary level. Further, books and resources were seen as critical for students, and it meant a great deal to the students and parents when their suggestions were considered or if they were sought out for ideas:

Ms. Johnson actually did read the class one of the books...*Neither*. She thought it was sweet... [it made me feel] really happy! (Emma)

So she was coming to me to ask for book recommendations, so that she had a good variety of books but also at different levels, so picture books, chapter books, young adult.

So, that was interesting. (Penelope)

While the benefits of an inclusive curriculum have already been highlighted, here the students and families themselves are a resource for the school in terms of inclusive literature that can be accessed through the classroom or individually through the library. This representation and invitation to collaborate is important, as they could also experience the opposite. Emma describes being limited in sharing information about her LGBTQ identity with her peers:

Every time I had a show-and-tell about something queer, she would never ever call on me. Because she didn't want me to tell the others about different things...I wanted to show books and flags.

The message that this sends is that while Emma is a member of the class, zie should not share an important part of zir identity with the rest of the class. Overall, Emma perceived that zie was called on less by teachers once zie came out as non-binary and equated it to the fact that they were not comfortable with her being different from the other students.

For these students, the school counselor role was seen as an additional resource and one that could influence their experiences within the school. On Alexis' first day at school as a girl, Jennifer reached out and asked the school counselor to check on her, which they did, and made sure that Alexis ate lunch that day with a group of friends. However, after that there was little follow up on the part of the counselor. For Emma, it was the school counselor that supported zir during some challenging years prior to zir identification as non-binary. Once Emma came out, the counselor incorporated a book supportive of the expansiveness of gender identity into her counseling curriculum. When discussing the meetings that they have had with the school regarding their children's identity, the school counselor was regularly part of those meetings, and thus was seen as someone with knowledge and skill to support these students. The training school counselors receive regarding LGBTQ and transgender issues and the positive impact of their efforts on the lives of LGBTQ students has been explored, but almost exclusively with secondary students (Maru, 2017; Simons & Cuadrado, 2018).

“You Have to Be Willing to Break Some Eggs”: Non-School Supports

While the research questions focused on the student experiences in schools, what emerged were findings that included factors outside the school that influenced how the students and families engaged with their school communities.

Parent Support and Advocacy

Parent Advocacy. The students advocated for themselves daily with peers and teachers, as well as participated in additional efforts such as this research project and speaking at school board meetings in an effort to create change. Their parents also modeled advocacy for their children through their work with the individual schools. Parental support is a protective factor for transgender youth, as discussed by Andrzejewski et al. (2021). Moreover, some parents of

transgender youth are highly engaged in supporting their children (Dangaltcheva et al., 2021).

Jennifer left one meeting without a clear understanding of how restrooms would be addressed for

Alexis:

...I followed up later and this got again pushed off to the assistant principal, but I was like, “I wanted to be clear that she can use the girls’ bathroom...that actually needs to be spelled out.” And [the assistant principal] was like, “Okay yes” officially. But I still don’t know, like I said, this was the weird COVID times. It was established: whenever she’s back in the building again, she’s using the girls’ bathroom. That’s been established.

Moreover, the parents were engaged in larger conversations about school practices for transgender students with their school districts, particularly around district policies because of the model policy requirements in the state. These discussions challenged relationships between the family and the school division:

You have to be willing to break some eggs. We’ve made some really wonderful allies, but we’ve also made some pretty ugly enemies, and pretty ugly enemies of people in power. But there’s nothing we can do. Like, it’s our kid. If, if one of our kids was an amputee we’d be fighting for accessibility, the difference is...and I see this a lot because I work with pediatric cancer patients...when a kid has a health crisis, everybody shows up for that kid. When a kid has a different gender identity, that kid is seen as a problem, and not as a person that has a right to be supported. (Penelope)

Given the strong feelings on the issue of transgender students in schools within the state, the parents were willing to accept the risks and consequences of their advocacy efforts, in no small part because they were not only considering their student’s experiences, but also the experiences of any transgender students within the school division.

Feelings of Fear. This did not mean that the parents did not experience fear for their children. Jennifer describes what it was like to send Alexis to school on the first day that she fully presented as a girl:

...it felt like I had just dropped my child into this thing and she was just this little kid, you know?...so I was thinking, “Oh my gosh, I just dropped my kid off that everyone thinks is a boy in a girl’s outfit and nobody’s gonna say why. And if there’s a day she’s gonna get bullied and teased, it’s today.” So leaving her that day was very, very hard.

Penelope shared similar concerns for Emma:

As soon as zie [Emma] was in a lunchroom or a playground, then you’re really relying on...it’s like going back to second grade again, you know that if something happens and occasionally things did, zie didn’t have any support, there wasn’t going to be anyone there that was going to step in and say, “No, you can’t tell zir that zie’s going to go to hell,” which happened at lunch one day, you can’t. And what it means is that zie has to be on heightened alert, because it’s fight or flight, constantly, there’s no safe place to land.

Moreover, these fears were not unfounded. There were threats to Emma and Penelope’s safety after Emma spoke at her local school board meeting about the need to support the state policy:

Like it’s great, you know, Emma stands up and talks in front of the school board and it’s the most beautiful, like, we practiced it for weeks and she stands up and just nails them to the wall and it’s this wonderful moment. And then we got doxed on a pro-Trump website and got threats, including calls to Child Protective Services...there are people out there who would do my kid harm and zie brings...every time even just using the proper pronouns, asking people to use the proper pronouns, potentially puts Emma at risk. It’s horrifying.

Despite these experiences, these parents continued to not only advocate for their own children, but for transgender students in their own districts, even with the threats and loss of anonymity:

You hope for the best, you try to be the loudest advocate you can be to draw that attention to yourself, because that's how you shield. And you try to make substantive changes in society, so that the world that they're navigating is a kinder, gentler one...so you put a human face [on it] and hope that it changes, where people are, and challenges the rhetoric and the ideologies that they've been asked to buy into. But it's rough.

(Penelope)

In the end, Jennifer expressed that her advocacy for Alexis was something that was not truly a choice for her as a parent:

A lot of it is just the feeling of I don't want her to have to be the one to do it, do all of it. That's above and beyond what you should have to be doing as a student in the schools or with your friends or with your friends' parents. I don't want that to be her job to teach everybody about things. So I do feel like I have to do a lot of pushing on that and sort of like I was saying, laying that groundwork before she even gets in the door at school.

Feeling fear as a parent was discussed by Goldstein et al. (2018) where the parent of a transgender girl was so overwhelmed she could not bring herself to send her child to school in a dress for the first time. Rather, she sent the dress to school in a bag where the teacher could then assist the student in dressing. While parental support is discussed as being important in other studies, they do not speak to the level of advocacy specific to schools and school districts addressed here by Jennifer and Penelope (Andrzejewski et al., 2021; Dangaltcheva et al., 2021). As such, it is worth noting the discussion from Jennifer and Penelope as to their efforts, their anxieties, and their resignation to do whatever it takes to protect their children.

Finding Your People

In addition to the supports from staff and peers received through the school, students greatly benefited from connections to others within their communities. Even if they were the only known transgender student within their school, local meet-up groups or even college and university clubs, with parent supervision, provided an opportunity for connection with other students and families who had similar experiences. This reduced the sense of isolation and helped to create a sense of pride in who they were as a transgender individual:

She started going to Little Rainbows [elementary LGBTQ group] and she met other kids. And that really, I think, solidified it for her. And she's like really proud to be trans, which I think is really nice...she has a lot of people. I have trans friends and things too. And when she started doing anything gender non-conforming, like I had a friend from high school who was very supportive, even though we hadn't kept in touch...he's transgender and he was like, "If that ever ends up being your child's identity, let me know. I'm here in the wings." So I had people like that. (Jennifer)

Moreover, immersive and extended experiences, such as a summer camp focused on LGBTQ students, were noted as having had a powerful impact on the identity formation and development of the students:

So the summer after second grade, we were looking online for other people that I could talk to and mom found this really good camp called Pride Camp, which is literally just a whole camp full with queer people. And I went there that summer, and it completely changed my life, it helped me know that I wasn't alone...there are other people out there. And that was really nice. And it really helped me understand what it's like to be different from others. (Emma)

It was this camp experience that allowed Emma to flourish the next year in school as well as engage in more advocacy for transgender students:

And that confidence that Emma talks about in third grade, 99% of that confidence came from Pride Camp. If we hadn't had Pride Camp, Emma would have had a very different third grade year because it's camp that gave us our kid back. It wasn't school. It wasn't us. (Penelope)

Johns et al. (2021) found that transgender students sought connections to supportive peers and communities within their schools. Further, Dangaltcheva et al. (2021) discussed how the parents of transgender, non-binary, and GNC students acknowledged this need for peer engagement and the benefits and challenges of their children seeking community online.

In addition to these outside groups, greater family support was discussed as an important factor in the development of the students as well as in how they were able to navigate school:

We have an entirely supportive family. Really, it's like a non-issue, I would say, with a lot of them. And I think one of the reasons that Alexis is somebody that came out early is because we've never said, "You have to be a certain way because you're a boy." Like, that's just not even in our vocabulary as parents and as soon as she was communicating wanting to wear dresses, that was fine. She wore dresses. (Jennifer)

Thus, the community of people surrounding a student outside of school was seen as critical to the success of the student within the school, whether it was to create support in case school was lacking or as an additional way to empower and encourage the students in their development and sense of pride in their identity.

However, it should be noted that while the parents were highly engaged in finding supportive communities for their transgender, non-binary, and GNC children, they were also not afraid to limit their exposure to those that were not accepting:

And also...realizing which people are not gonna be supportive and coming around. And I don't ever want to fully write people off, but we have neighbors that used to babysit for them and I'm like, they've posted transphobic things on Facebook so I'm like, "We're done having you." You can still play outside with their kids, that's fine, but like, you're not gonna get to—I don't trust you with my kids when I'm not there, to not say anything.
(Jennifer)

Dangaltcheva et al. (2021) also found that parents in their research had to make decisions to cut-off non-supportive family and friends for the benefit of their children. Thus, while these findings identify the need for extended communities for transgender students outside of their schools, they also note that these opportunities should be affirming and nurturing of their identities.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND ACTIONS FOR PRACTICE

Discussion

This study sought to explore how elementary-aged transgender students experienced school in a mid-Atlantic state (MAS), and more specifically examined supports and barriers to their education. After having interviewed two transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming (GNC) elementary students and their parents within the MAS, the findings were centered in three areas. First, there was the internal world of the students to include their exhaustion as well as their high levels of self-awareness. Next, there was the school environment to include education and training, differences in policy language versus implementation, and practices that work. The final finding was around non-school supports with a focus on their parents and outside organizations such as summer camps, local transgender groups, and their extended families. The sections below discuss these findings in relationship to the queer theoretical orientation and then the three research questions for the study: How do transgender, non-binary, and GNC elementary-aged students experience and navigate “schooling” in a MAS? What do these students reveal as support systems? What do these students identify as barriers? Additionally, there is an exploration of the parent component of the interviews.

Situatedness in Queer Theory

First, the findings of this study clearly identified cisgender normativity within the schools. As stated by Wimberly (2015), “most schools function as heteronormative institutions...” (p. 7). As such, not only are male-female romantic relationships considered the norm and made visible, but also inherent within this heteronormative construct we find a gender binary, one with very specific roles and power structures dependent upon whether someone is biologically assigned as “male” or “female” (Butler, 1990; Mayo, 2014; Wimberly, 2015; Wittig,

1997). These cisgender norms create specific rules around language and places, to include both the social and physical, and who belongs in these spaces. As such, barriers are encountered when Alexis requests to use the girls' restroom because she is transgender. In the eyes of the school, as a transgender female she does not quite belong in either a cisgender male bathroom or a cisgender female bathroom. Additionally, the initial practice of Alexis' classroom teacher was to group students' lunchboxes by gender, leaving no space for students who felt that they did not fit in either the category of "boy" or "girl." This lunchbox practice, perhaps even more than the policing of gendered spaces such as restrooms and locker rooms, serves to illustrate the pervasive nature of cisgender and heteronormativity in schools given that there was no defined purpose other than perhaps its convenience. Yet, it rendered Alexis invisible given that she neither felt male or female in that time and context (Wimberly, 2015). For Emma, zir non-binary identity is denied by the school as zie is not allowed to discuss it in class, nor are zir teachers allowed to use zir non-binary pronouns in front of the classroom. Zie, like Alexis, is made invisible. In effect, this practice reinforces the school as a cisgender space as it does not leave room for students who do not identify as either male or female but instead somewhere along the gender continuum. Both Alexis and Emma represent a threat to these established cisgender norms, and the power to fully affirm the students' identities in school rests firmly in the hands of school officials.

As both Emma and Alexis, as well as their parents Penelope and Jennifer, attempt to challenge this cisgender construct, they are met with a great deal of resistance. To not fit neatly into a specific box is to challenge norms and those responsible for enforcing them. In particular, Namaste (1994) advocates for an approach to queer theory that "expand[s] current borders" (p. 229), where all of those along the sexual and gender continuums can be seen and valued. In this

way, Alexis' emerging transgender female identity and Emma's non-binary identity would have a place within the walls of the school. Instead, every effort is made to keep these students and their identities at the margins. When acknowledgement of their identities is ultimately provided, it is in hidden or segregated spaces. For example, Emma's teacher is able to use zir pronouns, but only in communication that goes directly to the family, or in private moments between the teacher and Emma. Alexis' teacher makes a connection between the Native American concept of "two-spirit" and gender fluidity and is eager to share it with Alexis, but this is again something shared only between the teacher and the transgender student, not something that is brought more broadly to the class. In this way, the students' identities are only minimally acknowledged, kept at the periphery, tolerated, barely affirmed, and in no way are they celebrated. This maintains their gender identities as subversive (Rasmussen, 2016).

As such, the schools are not yet at a place where they are bringing these transgender, non-binary, and GNC students into the realm of normativity. By limiting any ability to have class discussions, LGBTQ curriculum for students, and any systemic attempts at training for all school staff, to include support staff such as bus drivers, it keeps gender identity and fluidity firmly ensconced at the margins of the school community (Namaste, 1994; Rasmussen, 2016). When a student identifies as transgender or non-binary, the school reacts to the individual students and quietly makes accommodations. This is instead of proactively creating cognitive and physical spaces where any student along the gender continuum automatically feels affirmed and able to see themselves as a valued member of the school community, all without the need for multiple meetings as well as approvals or denials for simple requests such as acknowledging names and pronouns or allowing them the dignity to use any restroom that aligns with their asserted identity. By creating these types of spaces, for example through a curriculum inclusive of the continuum

of sexual and gender identities, it would then, as stated by Mayo (2014), help “all students feel comfortable and valued in school” (p. 32). It is ultimately these kinds of spaces that Emma, Penelope, Alexis, and Jennifer seek within their schools.

Lastly, Wimberly (2015) shares that queer theory is “defined by action” (p. 8). This is reiterated by Rasmussen et al. (2014) who states that queer theory is “interested in questions of power and collective action” (p. 343). Alexis sees her participation in the research project as a means of advocacy. Her mother, Jennifer, continues to take action and return to the school for discussions and conversations about their responsibilities towards her daughter. Both Emma and Penelope are highly engaged with their local political process, speaking at meetings of their local school board and setting up conferences with individual board members to garner support for policy adoption. As such, all of the participants not only focused on the cognitive and affective aspects of transgender identities, but all spoke of specific actions they had taken to more broadly effect change within their schools and school divisions. In this way, their deeds bring queer theory to life.

Student Experiences

The students in this study demonstrated an active internal understanding of themselves and their identities, their schools, their communities, and the relationship across these continuums. Supported by their families, the students found language for their understandings of their gender identities. Emma zirsself acknowledged that zie came to zir own understanding of zir identity through a journey, with a key moment being zir first interaction with the term “non-binary” in a book. Up until then, zie had not had the language that zie felt encompassed who zie was. Once the students had the words to name their gender, the students then began to live fully in their identities at school, where they encountered both understanding and challenges. Thus,

they were able to find their own identities that were unique and non-imitative of the traditional cisgender binary (Namaste, 1996; Sedgwick, 2008).

In terms of challenges, the students met with harassment by peers and indifference or even thinly veiled intolerance on the part of the school staff. Similar to the experiences of older transgender, non-binary, and GNC students, they struggled at times with peers, as when Alexis was denied ownership of her identity by a bus patrol, or when friends started to ignore Emma once zie had disclosed zir non-binary identity. Moreover, they had challenges with school staff, for example a school counselor stating that gender identity was something best left for Emma to explore at the middle school level, a principal who strongly advocated for Alexis to use a single-user bathroom, or mandates from Emma's principal not to use zir preferred pronouns in class. In effect, these represented attempts to maintain the heteronormative and cisgender status-quo (Wimberly, 2015). These challenges created opportunities for growth, however, as Emma acknowledged that zie had learned how to better cope with those that were not affirming as a result of challenging exchanges. Moreover, these interactions contributed to greater levels of empathy for their peers, as seen when Emma shared that zie did not automatically assume a former peer still identified as a "tomboy," even when this student that had not been kind to zir in the past. Emma extended zir knowledge of gender fluidity to this peer, thus allowing for the potential for them to identify in their own unique way (Sedgwick, 2008). Thus, by nature of their internal reckoning with their transgender identities and engagement with their schools, they held a greater and more mature sense of self-awareness and empathy towards others.

However, the students also encountered peers and school staff that provided affirmation of their identities and helped to create positive spaces in the schools. Some of their peers not only served as friends and supporters, but also as surrogates who took on some of the burden felt by

Alexis and Emma to constantly serve as role models and educators about gender identity. Moreover, their friends and peers felt emboldened and comfortable to the point of challenging teachers and adults when they made mistakes, as when a peer corrected Alexis' art teacher regarding Alexis' transition. Their peers became advocates for their transgender friends. Similarly, there were school staff members that worked diligently to learn about gender identity and change their practices by means of being better supports to Alexis and Emma. Alexis' teacher quickly changed her practice of having students separate their lunchboxes by gender and also learned about the Native American concept of "two-spirit" to share with Alexis. Even though forbidden to use Emma's pronouns in the classroom, Emma's teacher did use them whenever she interacted with Emma individually or in writing. In many respects, with Alexis and Emma coming to know their own gender identity and then authentically engaging with the larger school collectively, both Emma and Alexis, their peers, and the school staff learned, grew, and matured together. As such, they and their peers were acting both in resistance to gender normativity but were also serving as educators to their communities (Mayo, 2014).

Alexis and Emma also connected with the broader LGBTQ and transgender community through local community supports, such as transgender groups and summer camps, that provided them with safe spaces to further build confidence and create a sense of belonging. These experiences were credited with supporting the students' efforts to advocate for themselves and other transgender, non-binary, and GNC students with their peers or through more public displays, such as speaking at a school board meeting in support of transgender-supportive policy adoption. This ability to serve other transgender students intensified the sense of empowerment and agency in both students. This journey through themselves, their schools, and their communities as transgender and non-binary individuals allowed them to be seen as experts and

role models for other students engaging in their own gender explorations and transitions. It is important to note that these connections were not simply about navigating difficulties with the cisgender normative culture in schools and communities, but were rather also a means of creating moments of joy, celebration, and the passing down of information (Mayo, 2014). Even though Alexis and Emma were around nine years-of-age, they demonstrated an extraordinary understanding of who they were and their place not only within their school, but within the broader LGBTQ community.

Support Systems

Both the students and their families stressed the importance of key school personnel that assisted them in navigating school as a transgender, non-binary, or GNC student. School counselors were noted to be helpful at times, and the importance of the right fit in the classroom teacher was discussed by both Emma and Alexis' families. As was previously discussed, there were school staff that took ownership of gathering the information and training they needed to be more supportive of these students. Alexis' teacher learned about the concept of "two-spirit," and Emma's teacher used Emma's preferred pronouns whenever possible. Additionally, in the case of Emma the school counselor took it upon themselves to find the necessary training so that they could understand gender identity and how to best support transgender students. There were even supportive staff found in the least anticipated places, such as the teacher that developed the virtual library section containing LGBTQ books. Penelope was quite surprised when that specific teacher reached out seeking book recommendations given that the teacher was known to be quite conservative from a political and religious standpoint. While there was still a great deal of distance to be traversed before the schools became environments that fully encompassed the spectrum of gender identities, through their work as educators Alexis and Emma were

empowering school staff to broaden their personal horizons as well as the spaces under their domain in the school to be more inclusive (Mayo, 2014). Thus, all along the way there were individuals in the schools that the students and families identified that were seen to be helpful, affirming, and willing to take action in support of the transgender students.

In addition to the importance of individual school staff in affirming student identities, support from their families and communities were also noted as critical. Both of the parents interviewed not only served to accept and celebrate their child's transgender identity, but also advocated for them at the school and district level. Penelope involved herself in meetings about her local school division's development and implementation of the MAS' transgender policy, and Jennifer kept speaking with administrators at her school until she felt it was understood that her daughter would be able to use the restroom facilities that corresponded to her gender identity. These parents also served as willing resources to the schools, suggesting books and providing information that assisted school staff in better understanding the concepts and needs of transgender, non-binary, and GNC students. As referenced earlier, a teacher specifically sought out Penelope to get recommendations on LGBTQ book ideas. As such, Penelope and Jennifer were critical players in the lives of their children and their schools, and engaged in a life of action (Rasmussen et al., 2014; Wimberly, 2015). Moreover, they represented a generation of parents that, according to Beemyn (2013), are allowing their transgender children to "be trans kids" (p. 160) versus attempting to change them in some way. Their support very likely influenced their children's positive identity development and mature sense of self.

One surprising finding in the area of supports was the importance outside connections played in the well-being of the students. Penelope discussed the significance of their extended family, but moreover the importance of a family that sent clear messages of acceptance around

all modes of gender expression and identity prior to the student's coming out. By having a family that de-emphasized traditional gender roles and expression, Emma likely felt more confident as zie explored their non-binary identity. Home was a safe space where, no matter what, zie would be welcomed and affirmed, regardless of what might have happened at school. Moving farther out of the family unit, supports through the local community, such as college LGBTQ groups or area transgender support groups were also discussed as helpful. Perhaps the most interesting non-school experience shared was that of the LGBTQ camp that Emma attended over a summer. It provided zir with an opportunity to engage with other youth as well as older LGBTQ figures who could serve as mentors. Moreover, it connected zir to the larger LGBTQ and transgender community, instilling an understanding that zie was not alone and that others had walked this path before. This may have been doubly important given that Emma lived in a rural part of the MAS. As Penelope described it, the camp was what gave Emma the confidence to speak at the school board meeting and settle into zir identity within their small community. In considering how many transgender, non-binary, and GNC students there might be in an elementary school, it makes sense that students would seek communities and experiences from outside their schools to gain fellowship, insight, and advice. In addition to their parents and families, these supports served as a further means of assisting these students in not only managing any barriers, but also in developing a sense of pride and agency around their gender identity (Mayo, 2014).

Barriers

One of the most significant barriers raised was that of the inconsistent application of existing policy or guidance on the individual situations of these students and families. This ranged from a lack of clear understanding around restroom use by Alexis and her family, to Emma's teacher being denied the ability to use zir preferred pronouns in class. As Jennifer

described, while there was district policy and guidance, the principal appeared to have chosen to express doubts about the policy and Alexis' situation through the guise of what he felt was best for the other students in the school. In essence, he chose to acknowledge the policy, the rights that Alexis had under its guidance, and then used his position as the leader of the building to discourage her from exercising those rights to their fullest. The result was a student who did not use a bathroom during the school day for several months. Similarly, while there was no policy established in Emma's school district at the time of her interview, the principal directed the teacher not to acknowledge Emma's gender identity in front of the class. Instead, the teacher had to furtively affirm Emma's identity behind-the-scenes, in effect denying her true self in front of others and only acknowledging it between themselves. All of these actions served to maintain the cisgender binary within the school, leaving no room for those who identified elsewhere on the continuum (Butler, 1990; Namaste, 1994; Wimberly, 2015; Wittig, 1997). As such, policy and guidelines were only as real as the school chose to make them, and the ability of individual schools and personnel to serve as the policy's gatekeepers inhibited the lives of the students.

It is important to note that this lack of policy implementation has potential ramifications for school divisions in addition to impacting the transgender students themselves. First, because of the law put in place by the legislature in the MAS, a school district that either chooses not to adopt policies at all in accordance with the model policy or who adopts a policy but does not enforce it opens themselves up for potential litigation from transgender students and their families (Lane, 2021; Virginia Department of Education, 2021). Given that use of facilities and pronouns are covered in the MAS model policy, Alexis' and Emma's experiences with their school administration on these topics run counter to current statute in the MAS. Moreover, based on the Biden administration's stated interpretation of Title IX as inclusive of gender identity, and

given that the MAS falls under the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeal's decision in *Grimm v. Gloucester Cty. Sch. Bd.* (2020), it is likely that any lawsuits brought by transgender students and their families against schools who do not allow students to use the restrooms aligned to their gender identity or who do not make good-faith efforts to adopt the pronouns requested by a student would have standing under the current legal landscape (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). State and federal statute as well as case law applicable to the MAS are firmly on the side of transgender, non-binary, and GNC students. Thus, not only does the lack of policy and implementation harm transgender students, but it also make schools highly vulnerable to legal action.

Another barrier was that of training and education, both for staff as well as for students. Both of the parents described having to educate staff on transgender issues. In one instance, a staff member took it upon themselves to get training on the topic once presented with a transgender student, which is laudable, but also served to indicate that it was a reaction to an immediate need versus something that was provided either in an educator or counselor preparation program or as part of regular staff professional learning. Without training, or with training only as a response to a transgender student in the school, schools then continued to place themselves in a reactive versus proactive stance and ran the risk of not fully complying with applicable policy or of doing harm to their relationship with the student and their family. With regards to educational opportunities for students, both Emma and Alexis felt strongly that LGBTQ topics and curriculum would be beneficial and would lessen the burden they felt to constantly serve in the role of educator, explaining themselves and their gender identity (Mayo, 2014). While prior research on secondary students has shown the benefits of LGBTQ inclusive curriculum on the lives of LGBTQ students, having elementary-aged transgender students speak

directly about how helpful it would be to their daily experience in school is important to acknowledge.

There were other school practices noted as barriers. The continued grouping of students by gender was presented as challenging, for instance a seemingly simple request to have the students put their lunches in a specific place based on whether they were a boy or a girl caused distress in Alexis as it reinforced the cisgender binary (Wimberly, 2015). A lack of communication and training across all interested parties was also raised, more specifically here around the buses. Given that children can spend a significant amount of time traveling to and from school on the bus, the bus served as an extension of the school community. Moreover, while a certain amount of support can be applied to the student's classroom, such as targeted education and assignment to a teacher that is known to be supportive, the school bus typically involves students from across the school at multiple grade levels, potentially opening transgender students up to harassment by students outside of their classroom who have not been given the same education or have not yet had experiences with other transgender students. Further, even if the school could be made to be a supportive and less gendered space, the bus could remain unwelcoming if not also addressed (Mayo, 2014; Wimberly, 2015). It is important for schools to consider all the environments under their control when developing plans to support transgender, non-binary, and GNC students, as eliminating harassment within the wall of the school is important, but its benefits might be countered if there is then bullying on the school bus.

Impact on Parents

While the focus of this study was on students and schools, it would be remiss to not include some discussion around the experiences of the parents that were interviewed. The two mothers that shared their insights were strong advocates for their children, working behind the

scenes with principals, teachers, and district administrators to ensure that Alexis and Emma were in affirming environments. However, more than this, they both attempted to change the systems themselves so that they and their children did not solely bear the burden of having to make accommodations. They did this through action, such as engaging in discussions with school staff as a mode of education around transgender issues, by providing resources such as books, and by meeting with leaders (Rasmussen et al., 2014; Wimberly, 2015). Particularly in the case of Penelope, Emma's mother, she indicated that she was having regular meetings with school board members and district leadership. Instead of taking on a passive role and waiting to see what the district might do with the state policy requirements, she chose to proactively involve herself in every aspect of that discussion. In part this was about Emma and making sure that she would get the best educational experience available in her community, but it was also about ensuring that other transgender children and their families would encounter fewer barriers in the future.

All of this said, it is also important to acknowledge the challenges these parents faced and the choices they had to make for their children. Jennifer spoke about having to carefully curate the neighborhood friends with whom Alexis played in order to prevent transphobic language from being directed at her by some of the parents. Having a transgender child impacted some of the parents' relationships with other adults, with some being strengthened and others being closed off. Additionally, both Penelope and Jennifer shared the fear that they felt for their children. While they could control the home environment and create high levels of support in their immediate families, every day they said "goodbye" to their children as they left for school they had to trust that the adults and students would treat their child with dignity and respect. While to some extent this is the case for every parent that sends their child to school, for these parents the fear was heightened knowing the obstacles faced by transgender children. Moreover,

their experiences with the schools gave them justification for these concerns, whether through negative interactions with principals or the taunts and harassment by their children's peers on the school bus. To be a parent of a transgender child was to know fear.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings from this study, there are several key recommendations for elementary schools and the actors who influence those spaces. These items would begin to create environments that not only celebrate students who already identify as transgender or non-binary, but would also support students who are exploring or just coming to terms with their gender identity. Additionally, there are recommendations for future research to build off of these findings.

Recommendations for Schools

Belief and Acceptance

Perhaps the most important thing for schools to do is to validate, listen to, and affirm the voices of younger transgender, non-binary, and GNC students in their schools. More than this, they should enter conversations with students who are exploring their gender identity from a lens of believing that they are capable of knowing and expressing who they are to the school. The students interviewed for this project were extremely self-aware and were able to clearly articulate their identities, their experiences, and how they made meaning of it all. This is not to say that their identities and modes of expression are static at nine years-of-age given that gender is a fluid construct. Rather, schools should accept as valid a student's consistently asserted gender identity that is different than their sex-assigned-at-birth for that period in that student's life. Given all of the research that shows how supporting and affirming young people's

transgender identities leads to better social, behavioral, and academic outcomes, it is in everyone's best interests to believe these children and families when they come forward.

Focus on Policy Implementation and Accountability

Given the challenges between policy development and subsequent implementation, schools and school divisions should consider creating systems that will allow for greater monitoring and accountability to determine if what has been written and codified is actually being followed. For the students and families interviewed here, even if there were directives that clearly spelled out the rights of the students to be called by their chosen name and pronoun or access the restroom that corresponded to their asserted identities, there were still barriers from school personnel in being able to access those accommodations. A policy is only worth the paper it is printed on if it is not being followed in the way that it was intended. Schools and school divisions should consider opportunities for monitoring the effectiveness of transgender supportive policies, whether that is through feedback forms, focus groups, regularly scheduled program evaluation, or other systems that allow for school division leaders to hear from a variety of stakeholders as to how the students and families are experiencing the specifics outlined in those directives.

Actively Create Gender Neutral Practices and Spaces

Schools should continue to consider opportunities to be more inclusive of the full expanse of gender identities. One way this could be addressed would be to provide resources to teachers and staff as to how to group students in ways other than "boys" and "girls." Teachers can number students off, they can use other identifiers such as colors of clothing, they can use birthdates, or any one of a number of options to break-down larger classrooms of students into smaller groups to facilitate operations or instruction. Further, schools should consider ways to

create gender-neutral spaces within schools. This could be done through the creation of gender-neutral restrooms throughout the building, whether single-stall or communal. While not a physical space, schools should consider any instruction that is separated by gender, such as family life education, and whether this could be taught in a way that did not separate the students in this way. If these types of subjects are separated because of classroom management or because there are concerns about students feeling comfortable asking questions in front of the other gender, staff can determine solutions ahead of time, such as setting clear behavioral expectations ahead of the content or creating a mechanism for an anonymous gathering of questions from the group. In this way, all students are getting the full spectrum of content and information without causing undue stress to students who do not fall neatly into a cisgender binary, and yet still allowing for all students to feel comfortable in asking relevant questions of the instructors.

Gender Inclusive Curriculum and Resources

On the topic of curriculum, schools need to consider how they can better include gender diversity within elementary content. Both Alexis and Emma spoke about having to constantly educate their peers about their identities or argue with them about their validity. Here it was the students that had suggestions, such as including the topic of gender identity in family life education curriculum at the elementary school level. The parents had also provided many book suggestions to the schools that could be read to elementary classrooms in a developmentally appropriate way. While there are those in these communities that would likely advocate from the position of these topics being best left to the home for introduction, the issue at hand here is that the topics are already on display and under discussion in the elementary schools simply by virtue of having transgender, non-binary, and GNC students present. It was clear from the student interviews that questions were being asked and answers given on the topic, but the weight of

these discussions fell primarily on the transgender students. It is no longer truly possible to insulate elementary children from the topic of gender identity within most public-school environments, and the issue is not one of sex or sexuality but rather of celebrating the diversity of identities within a community. If a major goal of schools is to prepare a democratic and engaged citizenry, the inclusion of developmentally appropriate content about gender identity would help to better prepare both the cisgender and transgender students with the language and basic understandings needed to engage with and support those who may be different from themselves.

Staff Training for All

Finally, schools should include training for all school staff, to include bus drivers and other non-instructional personnel, on the topics of gender identity. All of the participants in this study encountered staff that had not received any substantive education about gender identity or transgender children. Some of the staff, such as a school counselor at one of Emma's schools, took it upon themselves to get additional information once they became aware of Emma's non-binary identity. Others struggled when encountering these students, such as the bus drivers. However, perhaps some of these interactions between the school staff and the families would have gone differently had all staff had some basic training on the topic. Not only would staff training help in simple day-to-day dealings or in meetings to plan supports, but it would also help staff recognize bullying and harassment based on gender identity as well as provide strategies to intervene. Whether it is the bus patrol that denied Alexis' asserted female identity or the child on the playground who told Emma zie was "going to hell," it was clear that there was a need for adults to be able to recognize these exchanges for what they were and intercede. From a pragmatic perspective, there would likely be staff who challenged a requirement to participate in

these trainings, and though at a basic level schools have a responsibility to keep all the students under their care safe and supported. Training specific to gender identity, risk factors for transgender, non-binary, and GNC youth, and strategies to support them to include intervening when bullying or harassment are occurring would help to ensure that school staff possessed the same language and tools that could be used to create positive environments for all involved.

Recommendations for Future Research

Additional Studies on Elementary Transgender Students, Schools, and Parents

While this study can certainly add to the greater body of research on elementary-aged transgender, non-binary, and GNC students, it is one of the only examples thus far that focuses on how these students experience school using their own voices. This, combined with the fact that this study had an extremely limited number of participants, indicates that more research of a similar vein is needed to further explore how students in other locations, of other races and ethnicities, and with differing levels of parental or guardian affirmation find support or barriers when they enter school every day. Additionally, this study focused on the perspectives of the students and attempted to highlight their voices. However, the parents interviewed had their own detailed stories to tell, and this study could have easily focused solely on their perspectives based upon the findings in the data. There is room for future work to highlight their experiences not only with the schools, but also as parents engaging with this issue and working to ensure that their children have the best possible outcomes available to them. It is highly likely that the pride, sense of self, and levels of maturity found in Emma and Alexis were due in part to the unwavering support and advocacy of Penelope, Jennifer, and the rest of their family members.

Impact of Community Organizations and Camps

In terms of specific findings that warrant future attention, one that truly stood out during the interviews was that of the power of the LGBTQ focused summer camp that Emma attended. Certainly summer camps for those that are marginalized in American society and the impact they have on those that attend have been highlighted in movies such as *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* (Newnham & LeBrecht, 2020). However, the impact that the LGBTQ camp had on Emma was profound, with Alexis gaining a similar but less intense sense of belonging through her local Little Rainbows group. There are a wealth of organizations out there that focus on creating playgroups and support spaces for transgender youth, to include elementary aged children (Virginia Department of Health, Disease Prevention Division & Virginia Transgender Taskforce, 2021). Moreover, as Emma shared there are LGBTQ focused summer camps. More research could be done to explore the impact of these organizations and experiences on the lives of the children they serve, and more specifically on how it effects their engagement with school and influences efforts at advocacy.

Influence of Peers and Curriculum

While much of the research on transgender students and schools focuses on interactions between students and school staff, Emma and Alexis both spoke about the support that they garnered from their peers. This included times that their friends would speak up for them in class when teachers seemed unclear about their gender identity or changes that may have occurred. Supportive and caring adults are a protective factor for transgender youth, and though the impact of supportive and caring peers is an area that is open for additional exploration. Additionally, there is also a need for a greater examination of the impact of an LGBTQ focused curriculum on transgender students in elementary schools, and more specifically materials focused on gender

diversity. Curriculum already exists from organizations such as *Welcoming Schools* by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation (n.d.) and could be utilized for such research.

Gendered Practices and Spaces

Additional exploration is needed to understand the climate and experience of these students in educational spaces outside of the classroom, such as on school buses. For both Emma and Alexis, the school buses had been problematic, and it also appeared as if the drivers had received little information and training regarding transgender students. It would be interesting to attempt to measure the impact of an educational program about gender identity and diversity delivered to school transportation staff on the experiences of elementary transgender students. Further, the participants in this study indicated that the elementary school itself was still a highly gendered space. From gendered classes, such as family life education, to gendered practices around lunch boxes or lining up, students are consistently having to group themselves within a gender binary. This does not leave space for those students whose identities do not neatly fit into this construct. Moreover, facilities such as gender-specific communal restrooms also still support this binary. This opens several lines of future inquiry. One would be to examine the impact of training and a removal of groupings by gender in schools on transgender, non-binary, and GNC students. Another option would be to look at any elementary schools that have created gender-neutral facilities to determine if those transgender students' experiences were substantively different as a result of creating more inclusive spaces.

Researcher Reflections

All transgender students should have what I was denied: the opportunity to be seen for who we are by our schools and our government.

--*Gavin Grimm* in Davies (2020)

From the moment I began my doctoral program, I knew that I wanted to write my dissertation on the topic of transgender students' experiences in schools. In our careers and in our lives, we all have opportunities to find those areas in which we can create the greatest impact. This represents another step not only in my own professional journey but in my personal ethic to leave this world better than I found it, and to use what strengths I possess to effect change.

Throughout this project I have been humbled. First and foremost, the initial plan for this dissertation was to have up to ten interviews with students and families, all from a single geographic area in the MAS. In my proposal defense, there were even questions from the committee about my plans for making decisions should I be saturated with willing participants. In reality, I struggled as a researcher with recruitment. Area LGBTQ organizations did send out the study information, I did engage with my networks on social media, I asked my initial research participant to share with their contacts if they were so inclined, and I was even provided opportunities to share my recruitment information in a state meeting of school counseling supervisors. After completing only one interview, I amended the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval to expand the study to include the whole MAS. This garnered my second interview. Additional months of recruitment efforts yielded some emails from interested parties, but either because they did not meet the study criteria or because they simply stopped communicating, no other eligible participants stepped forward. This was a lesson to me as a researcher in that while I could design and envision a solid study that would yield comprehensive data, and I could lay solid groundwork for recruitment, in the end I could not control who elected to eventually take part. With this understanding, though, came the realization that I needed to work with those participants that elected to engage in the study, and ensure that my methodology clearly discussed the number of participants and the homogeneity of the sample as limitations.

The other humbling aspect to this work was the students themselves. I was very open to any findings that emerged from the student interviews, and I did not enter with many preconceived notions of how they might respond. My own experiences working in the field on this topic for the last ten years has taught me how quickly changes can occur and how widely experiences can differ. However, as I spoke with them, reviewed transcripts, and coded the data, I remained amazed with their depth of understanding, maturity, and ability to speak eloquently about their experiences in terms of their identity formation as well as school. By virtue of their circumstances, they have become advocates for themselves and for others in a way that many other nine year-old students are not. While there may certainly be parental influence involved here, innate within both of these students was an ability to clearly speak about the practices that worked as well as perceived barriers to their being able to fully engage as transgender and non-binary youth in their elementary schools. Yet, as their stories illuminate, many of these students' voices are still not being heard. As the quote from Gavin Grimm at the start of this section states, they and their other transgender, non-binary, and GNC peers should be able to be seen and heard in their schools. To deny them agency over their words and understandings of who they are and what they need is a grave disservice.

Finally, I have come to understand that while I may not have gotten the number of participants for which I had initially planned, the voices that I did hear from provided a wealth of information specific to their contexts. As the MAS has struggled over the last two years with the mandated transgender student policy adoption, it was a critical time to hear from these students and families, particularly as they lived in two different parts of the state. Given Emma and Penelope's high levels of engagement in the policy discussions at their local school divisions, their experiences are timely and important for exploration and understanding. While some states

and school divisions might elicit feedback on policy through allowing time-limited speakers at board meetings or by inviting written comments, these efforts cannot take the place of doing more targeted research that fully seeks to understand their experiences through questioning and reflection. While the ultimate value, trustworthiness, and transferability of this study will be determined by others, I am grateful to have been able to give structure and narrative to Alexis, Emma, Jennifer, and Penelope's voices through this project. They have taught me not only about qualitative research but have increased my own understandings as an educator and practitioner responsible for policy development, adoption, and implementation regarding transgender students in schools.

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APPENDIX A: IRB LETTER



OFFICE OF THE VICE CHANCELLOR FOR RESEARCH & INNOVATION

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects
805 W. Pennsylvania Ave., MC-095
Urbana, IL 61801-4822

Notice of Approval: Amendment #03

August 11, 2021

Principal Investigator	Yoon Pak
CC	Darrell Sampson
Protocol Title	<i>Elementary Transgender Students' Experiences of School</i>
Protocol Number	21237
Funding Source	Unfunded
Review Type	Expedited 6, 7
Amendment Requested	Expanding recruitment to the national level through publically available social media
Status	Active
Risk Determination	No more than minimal risk
Approval Date	August 11, 2021 (amendment approval date)
Closure Date	October 15, 2025

This letter authorizes the use of human subjects in the above protocol. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed and approved the research study as described.

The Principal Investigator of this study is responsible for:

- Conducting research in a manner consistent with the requirements of the University and federal regulations found at 45 CFR 46.
- Using the approved consent documents, with the footer, from this approved package.
- Requesting approval from the IRB prior to implementing modifications.
- Notifying OPRS of any problems involving human subjects, including unanticipated events, participant complaints, or protocol deviations.
- Notifying OPRS of the completion of the study.

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

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APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Elementary Transgender Students' Experiences of School Semi-Structured Individual Student Interview Protocol: Sampson

Opening

- Thank them for their time and participation
- Reminder of the purpose of the evaluation
- Statement of confidentiality of identity, notes, and records to include audio recording
- Obtain verbal informed consent of parent or guardian and child
- Clarify the student's name and preferred pronouns
- Reminder that the student may elect to not answer questions
- Reminder that the student may elect to end participation at any time and any data will be deleted and/or destroyed

Questions

- Please share with me some of your favorite things about school. What do you enjoy?
- Tell me about what it is like to be a transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming student in your school.
- Please share with me your experiences with your friends and classmates.
- Please share with me your experiences with teachers and other school staff members at your school.
- What has been helpful to you in your school(s) as a transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming student?
- What has been challenging for you in your school(s) as a transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming student?
- Do you ever feel that you've been treated differently in school because of your gender identity? If so, please tell me about it.
- If you could change anything about your experience in school as a transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming student, what would that be? Why?
- What else do you think would be helpful for me to know about you or your experiences school?

Probing questions may be asked depending on responses to the above. They might be in the areas of discrimination (being treated differently than classmates due to gender identity), bullying or harassment, restroom and/or locker room use, overnight field trips (if applicable), records, and athletic participation (if applicable):

- Tell me more about that experience.
- What words would you use to describe how you felt?
- What did you think about when that happened?
- What did you do next?
- How did you solve that situation?
- If it could have happened differently, how do you wish it would have gone?

- What would have been helpful instead?

Closing

- Thank them again for their time and participation
- Let them know that you may reach out to confirm a statement or meaning as the process unfolds
- Provide them with contact information should they have any follow-up questions

**Elementary Transgender Students' Experiences of School
Semi-Structured Individual Student Interview Protocol (Parents or Guardians): Sampson**

Opening

- Thank them for their time and participation
- Reminder of the purpose of the evaluation
- Reminder of confidentiality of identity, notes, and records to include audio recording
- Confirm verbal informed consent of parent or guardian
- Clarify the parent or guardian's name and preferred pronouns
- Reminder that the parent or guardian may elect to not answer questions
- Reminder that the parent or guardian may elect to end participation at any time and any data will be deleted and/or destroyed
- Request as to which of three charities they would select for a donation to be made for their participation in the study: GLSEN, The Trevor Project, or the National Center for Transgender Equality

Questions

- Please tell me about your thoughts and/or feelings on what your child has just shared.
- Please describe the support system in place for your child here at home.
- Please describe the support system in place for your child at school.
- Please share with me your experiences addressing any barriers you have encountered in supporting your child at school.
- What else do you think would be helpful for me or other families to know about you or your experiences with your child's school?

Probing questions may be asked depending on responses to the above. They might be in the areas of discrimination (being treated differently than classmates due to gender identity), bullying or harassment, restroom and/or locker room use, overnight field trips (if applicable), records, and athletic participation (if applicable):

- Tell me more about that experience.
- What words would you use to describe how you felt?
- What did you think about when that happened?
- What did you do next?
- How did you solve that situation?
- If it could have happened differently, how do you wish it would have gone?
- What would have been helpful instead?

Closing

- Thank them again for their time and participation
- Let them know that you may reach out to confirm a statement or meaning as the process unfolds
- Provide them with contact information should they have any follow-up questions