FREAKS AND FRAUDS OR BEATING THE ODDS? EXPLORING NOTIONS OF VISIBILITY AND VALIDATION FOR TRANSGENDER MUSIC TEACHERS

BY

M.R. ROWLAND

DISSERTATION

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Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Bridget Sweet, Chair
Professor Jeananne Nichols, Director of Research
Professor Andrew Megill
Associate Professor Toby Beauchamp
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to seek insight into the music teaching experiences of transgender music teachers and understand the importance of human connection as it intersected with their perceptions of visibility and validation in the classroom. The study was framed around two research questions that asked how transgender teachers perceived their trans identities as visible in their music classrooms and how those perceptions of visibility and validation impacted their ability to make human connections with those around them.

The participants of this study included three music teachers representing many facets of music education. Two of the three participants worked in independent or charter schools while the third taught in an urban setting. They were intentionally selected for their confidence in being out as trans in their school community. Data generation for this study included the use of semi-structured interviews, journals, observations, and participatory conversations through weekly text messages. The data were then analyzed through the writing and re-writing of each person’s chapter and finally through their connections to the research questions.

The findings revealed that when these transgender music teachers were seen as human beings, that their abilities to make connections with their students and colleagues saw a marked improvement. Expanding notions of what it means to be a human being requires a questioning and challenging of traditional beliefs and understandings of the “many ways there are to be a human being” (Feinberg, 1998, p. 5). And since humanity is often shaped by the social environment, it was important that the participants made positive human connections with the people with whom they worked.
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I never thought I wanted to get a doctorate, but I came to this degree program because of a traumatic moment in my teaching career; a moment that may have inadvertently saved my life. When I started working with Dr. Jeananne Nichols in the fall of 2019, I was lost and afraid, but somehow, also ready to face my trauma. You re-introduced me to myself through narrative inquiry and for that, I will always be grateful. Through “advisatexts” at the end of this journey, you helped guide me through some of the most stressful days of this study. Thank you for the validation all these years. Maybe iron does sharpen iron after all.

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Keep your heads held high, my friends.

Love and diversity WILL win!
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CHAPTER 1: TO RESIST THIS VOID

When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you...when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing. It takes some strength of soul--and not just individual strength, but collective understanding--to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard.


“Are you a boy or a girl?” the first grader asked me.

The heat rushed to my face, reddening it with humiliation.

I waited for the cooperating teacher to do something.

But he stood there.

Head down.

Behind the piano.

The other university students’ jaws dropped as their heads whipped in my direction.

I waited. But nobody spoke.

So I crouched down and faced the young student, “Well, what did your teacher say?”

She shrugged her shoulders, “He said ‘Ms.’”

I looked over to see what my cooperating teacher was doing.

His head was still down.

He was pouring over his lesson plan as if he had never taught music before.

“Okay, then let’s just go with that,” I said as I moved to the back of the classroom.

My peers followed silently.

The cooperating teacher walked to the circle, smiled at the students, and started class.
Those Who Have the Power to Name

I had wanted to be a teacher for a very long time. It began during the long summers of being responsible for my two younger siblings while my parents were at work. To make those days seem shorter, we played my favorite “game” – school. Being that I was five years older than my next sibling, I used my power as the oldest to make this their favorite game, too.

The morning began by doing simple math problems out of my mom’s antique math textbooks. After cracking the spine and blowing off the dust, my twelve-year-old self, selected problems that I knew my siblings could do; they were seven and six. After math, it was time for reading and writing, which often turned into the creation of “world premiere” productions that we scripted and later performed for our parents. We brought the house down with our recreation of Abbott and Costello’s *Who’s on First?* I always tried to get them interested in having music class next, but they just wanted to have lunch. Playing school was only fun for a couple more years. Once my siblings realized they did not actually like this game, I lost my power to be their teacher.

Fast-forward to my freshman year in high school. My friends and I taught the first, second, and third grade students in our high school’s summer show choir camp, Little Vibrations. The first song we taught was Steppenwolf’s *Born to be Wild.* The elementary students loved it! During a snack break, one student shouted, “Hey Miranda! Can we play the air guitar in this part right here – wait for it – this part. . .”

The young choreographer collected all the air from the room, got ready to sing and busted out his air guitar.

“BOOORN TO BE WIIIIILD!”

“That’s amazing! I love that idea!” I said as everybody mimicked his moves.
This was way more fun than doing dusty, old math problems with my ungrateful siblings. I was hooked. I wanted to be a music teacher.

From that moment on, all I could think about was being a teacher. I knew that I called all of my teachers Mr. or Ms., so I likely would be called Ms. Rowland. I just did not understand the way that being called Ms. would make me feel until I heard it for the first time.

**Psychic Disequilibrium**

Clara, the first-grade student who questioned my introduction as Ms. Rowland in the opening vignette, was so confused. I did not match her expectations of what a Ms. teacher would look like or act like. Perhaps Clara expected that this Ms. Rowland would have long hair and might wear dresses with stylish flats or heels. Perhaps this Ms. Rowland would be caring and nurturing like her other Ms. teachers and other women in her life. Perhaps this Ms. Rowland would be bubbly and energetic and speak in a higher vocal range. Instead, what Clara saw was THIS Ms. Rowland, with short, spiky, expertly gelled hair, wearing pants and a tie, and speaking in a lower voice than her other Ms. teachers.

Ms. Smith and Mr. Lloyd, my preservice teaching peers standing nearby, were visibly recognizable and socially intelligible as a female and a male teacher. Ms. Smith came to this teaching experience in a dress with a thin belt around the middle that accentuated her figure, her wavy hair just touching her shoulders. Mr. Lloyd was in his black slacks, a white shirt, and a patterned tie, his hair closely shaved and his wispy-thin sideburns reaching his jawline. Ms. Smith’s energy was bubbly and outgoing while Mr. Lloyd wore a confident smile as he stood with his arms crossing his chest. But when it came to me, when I was introduced as a teacher, I was not legible to Clara as Ms. and her question made me feel as if I was more of a freak than a teacher. I was visibly different.
As a young pre-service instructor, I was still trying to make sense of myself in the role of the teacher in the music classroom. I had not even begun to consider the ways my gender identity intersected with my teacher identity. I had been so focused on what it meant to be a teacher that I forgot that I would be called or seen as Ms. Rowland. By questioning my appearance, Clara questioned a critical aspect of my being. While I do not know what Clara was thinking, the question itself made me feel like I had to be legible as a person before she could see me as a teacher. Clara’s question stayed with me as I progressed through the final stages of my teacher preparation program. How could I be the teacher, leader, conductor, if I was not first seen as human?

***

On my first day of student teaching, the seventh and eighth grade students were curious about me as they whispered to each other before class started. One student from the baritone section asked his neighbor, “Dude, is our new teacher a girl or a boy?”

“Bro, I don’t know,” said the second student, scratching his head. He turned to the soprano section. “Hey Jasmine, what do you think about them?”

“I mean, I have no idea,” Jasmine answered, “but I think whoever they are, they’re about to teach.”

“Hi everyone! Let’s stand up.” I began. Then one callous, blockhead student in the back of the room spoke up and loudly asked the question on everyone’s mind . . .

“HEY! ARE YOU A GIRL OR A BOY?!”

An audible gasp, then silence filled the room. Forty other students awaited my response. Some smiled; some covered their mouths with their hands. I looked to the cooperating teacher. He stood there, taking attendance. I realized I was on my own again, but this time I knew what to
do. I looked the student in the eye and met his challenge, “Does it matter? Stand up, let’s warm up and maybe you and I can chat after class.”

This time, I did not back down and wait for help. This time, even though I was the new student teacher, I had found my authoritative voice. The class chuckled nervously while getting to their feet to participate.

I got back to work, but inside I was fuming. Why did my cooperating teacher just stand there? This was my first day in his classroom and he could have made a wonderful first impression by standing up with me, supporting me, and answering this rude student instead of leaving me to assert that level of authority on the first day. He could have addressed students by telling them that their behavior was not acceptable, that I was a special guest who was going to be with them for the next several weeks. He could have done anything. But he did nothing, and so there I was – Ms. Rowland. I didn’t really know who she was, but if being Ms. Rowland meant that I got to make music with students, then I guess that’s who I would be because I was determined to be a teacher and I was expected to be her.

Still, the thought haunted me: I was going to have to be Ms. Rowland forever, wasn’t I?

**It Takes Strength of Soul**

After earning my degrees on the East Coast, I headed back to the Midwest to teach at a local community college. Thanks to a scholarship program that also provided employment upon graduation, I went back to fulfill my agreement to teach there for the next three years. At the community college, I was Professor Rowland, not Ms. Rowland. I wanted no part of Ms. Rowland anymore and unsurprisingly, my most authentic and most confident teaching came
during that part of my career. Not once did I have to feign comfort when I heard someone call my name. I could focus on my work rather than manage the fear that Ms. Rowland would come back in, uninvited. As Professor Rowland I experienced a sense of self and a confidence that I did not have as Ms. Rowland.

When my commitment at the community college ended, I had to find another job. Empowered by feeling like the gifted academic, Professor Rowland, I drew from that confidence to apply and interview in a public school where I knew I was expected to be Ms. Rowland. But because I had gained such respect and confidence as Professor Rowland, I thought I could make a difference in any location – so I applied for the choral director position at the junior high and high school in my hometown where I had once been a student.

This was the school where I had been tormented because of my sexual orientation and gender presentation. Initially, I was proud that my hometown would hire me even though they knew that I was a lesbian, that they recognized that part of me and still decided that I was the best one for the job. I accepted their offer for this position because of that pride and for a brief moment, I thought maybe things would be different this time. And if it should prove to be the same old small town, I took the job because I wanted to be the teacher that other queer students could come to when they were feeling the icy grip of oppression, pushed aside like outcasts, victims of homophobic targeting. I wanted to be the teacher that I had needed when I was a struggling, queer student there.

To move to this school, I had to leave Professor Rowland behind and masquerade as Ms. Rowland again. As her I did not always feel confident or seen. My students seemed to consider me as their butch lesbian choir director who wore a tailcoat at school concerts. Once after an incredibly successful rehearsal, I chatted with some of the baseball players that sang for me in
choir, “Wow! Now THAT was a great rehearsal. I really appreciate your effort today, my friends.”

Bryce, a student who stood about six inches taller than me, assured me, “Ya know, Ms. Rowland, we’re happy to help. Most of us just think of you as a prettier one of the guys.” He laughed as he began walking out the door, “Man, I always forget how short you are when I stand up, but yeah…we’ve got your back, Ms. Rowland.”

Bryce had Ms. Rowland’s, I mean, he had my back, but who was Ms. Rowland? I had allowed my students to see somebody that was not truly me. I felt like a fraud. Was I really making connections with my students or was Ms. Rowland acting as a barrier to that human connection? I left what should have been a positive interaction feeling invalid because Bryce did not see me as the person I knew I was. Yet in class, when I was able to focus on music making with my students, I could almost dissociate from being her and forget, if only for a moment, that my students only saw me as the big lesbian, Ms. Rowland.

***

The beautiful, 6-foot-tall drag queen, Miracle Intervention took the microphone and headed to center stage where she introduced the newest act, “Hello my lovelies, how is everyone doing tonight?!” The clamorous roar of the crowd began masking the sounds of the lively bus station behind the club.

“Y’all are in for a real treat tonight because we have a new boy with us and he is CUUUUTE, mmm.” I felt my heart jump into my throat causing a tightness that somehow, I managed to swallow. She continued, “Put your hands together and get your singles ready for Devon Honorasss!!!” The audience detonated approving applause as the spotlight shifted to Devon, I mean, to me. The bass was thumping as I stroked my fresh goatee, made of clippings
from a recent haircut. I winked at the audience and took my first breath. The deejay pushed play and I began singing live “with” Garth Brooks while strangers threw dollars on the stage.

When I was younger, I always heard transgender people described as “those freaks”, but I felt so much more at home when I performed in drag, as Devon. I wrestled with the shame and fear that I might be becoming “one of them”, a “freak”. Was I trans? Was I a freak? Was I wrong to be feeling so comfortable on stage as Devon Honorasss?

After the performance I walked up the circular staircase to the dressing room and took one more look in the mirror at Devon. My heart seemed to speed up and slow down at the same time while I stared at him. Here, in a booze-stench gay bar, behind a bus station, where the faint smell of mildew wafted in the air whenever the dry ice machine was turned on, I was the CUUUUTE Devon Honorasss. Here, I felt safe to honor and explore my masculine presentation while strangers validated my existence by throwing money at me and buying me drinks—but there was still something missing. I was seen as the drag king, Devon, but not as me, Miranda. I was going to miss the feelings of validation that coincided with performing as Devon, but being Devon also made me feel like a freak and a fraud – just like I felt as Ms. Rowland.

I had pushed all the way to the masculine end of the gendered spectrum and still felt like I did not completely belong. I did feel validated, but I didn’t feel visible. Did that make me a freak? No, I decided. Inhabiting myself as Devon let me see that I was something more. I wasn’t Devon. I wasn’t Ms. Rowland. I was Miranda. I was beginning to understand myself as none of these people and all of these people. I took a deep breath and began to pull away at the spirit gum on my face, packed my bags, and walked out to my truck.
As the understanding of gender identity continues to evolve, so does the discourse. Transgender, as an umbrella term, has become a familiar way of defining persons whose gender identity does not match the biological sex assigned to them at birth. The use of cis and trans as prefixes imply “staying within certain gender parameters (however they may be defined) rather than crossing (or trans-ing) those parameters” (Enke, 2012, p. 61). Recent scholarship argues that the term transgender still centers gender as a binary construct and is not inclusive of persons who do not find comfort at either end of the binary spectrum, like Devon and Ms. Rowland. Devon, Ms. Rowland, and Professor Rowland, may have found visibility and validation under either a cisgender or a transgender label. I, M.R., still navigate a gendered world where I struggle with visibility using the non-binary side of the transgender umbrella.

Nadine Hubbs (2010) discussed visibility and validation at the inaugural conference for Establishing Identity: LGBT Studies and Music Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She described visibility as a desire to move from the background to the foreground. Hubbs offered that the positives of visibility are: “recognition, validation, access, and weakening the grip of heteronormativity, which would insist that the only real lives and stories are heterosexual ones, that indeed, heterosexuality constitutes the natural order of things” (2010). But Hubbs also reminded the audience that with visibility comes the possibility of unwanted attention: “But visibility can also have negative ramifications, including the risks of homophobic targeting that come with queer visibility” (2010).

***

On a cold Sunday in March 2018, I was summoned to the superintendent's office, a large room with bookshelves, degrees hanging from the wall, and an oversized desk complete with gold nameplate. The superintendent sat in his wingback chair, flanked by the male junior high
principal on his left and the male high school principal on his right. I sat between my two union representatives, who both happened to be mothers of a few of my students, in the small chairs in front of the desk.

I knew what was coming. It had only been a matter of time. The superintendent informed me that an anonymous complaint had been lodged accusing me of “grooming female students to become victims of my sexuality.” I sat there paralyzed as the grim-faced administrators gave me my options: I could “voluntarily resign” or I could be fired; and with that, came the life altering thought that I might never be a teacher again. But I didn’t want to fight anymore; I had nothing left to give. I resigned.

That day, in early March, I was no longer Ms. Rowland. I was no longer a teacher.

**Stand Up, Demanding to be Seen**

American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich’s work of the 1970s and 1980s served as fundamental texts for second-wave feminism. Although much of Rich’s work focused on women rejecting gendered, societal expectations, it also encouraged readers, regardless of gender, to internalize their existence as valid and present themselves without fear of targeting or erasure.

*When those who have the power . . . choose not to see you or hear you . . . stand up, and demand to be seen.*

For many LGBTQ+ music teachers, like myself, the challenges of being out, or visible, to their school communities often lead to their departure from the field (Harris & Jones, 2014, p. 17). Because of a lack of understanding and support, many transgender, both binary and non-binary, music teachers either attempt to perform false versions of themselves to survive their school day (Miller, 2016) or they *stand up* for themselves and *demand to be seen.*
Garrison (2018) and much of the community of social justice advocates believe “the work of undoing gender should not fall to those with the largest interactional burden to bear” (p. 633), but I believe that in telling my story, I can introduce the problem and call into question if mine is the only story. Are there other music educators who “resist the classification of male or female” (p. 633) and how could their stories illuminate and inform our ongoing struggle to create welcoming and affirming music classrooms for students and teachers alike?

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to seek insight into the music teaching experiences of transgender music teachers and understand the importance of human connection as it intersects with their perceptions of visibility and validation in the classroom. This narrative inquiry will be structured around the following research questions:

1. How do transgender music teachers experience visibility and validation with their students, student parents, colleagues, and administration?

2. To what extent does the perception of visibility and validity influence their ability to make human connections through music with their students and the larger school community?

While the experiences of transgender music students have begun to be considered by scholars in music education, the voices of transgender music teachers remain mostly unheard. Recent research and practitioner literature has addressed the ways in which understandings of gender identity is influencing many teachers’ approaches to performance attire, choice of repertoire, and the usage of gendered language in the classroom. And it follows that transgender music teachers, themselves, would have much to add to the ongoing discussion, but they have not been sought out or offered the chance to contribute.
Dissertation Structure

This study was initially limited to transgender choral music educators because the voice, “as both biology and culture, reflects and contributes to the diversity of gender variance in human life” (Mezel, 2000, p. 157). In addition to being rooted to my story as a choral music educator, the consideration of the intersection between gender identity and vocal development made a strong case for this limitation (Garrett & Palkki, 2021, p. 176). Due to the interest in this study during participant recruitment, the decision was made to expand to include all transgender music educators, regardless of primary instrument. The methodology section of this dissertation will include a more detailed explanation about the exclusions caused by solely focusing on choral music teachers.

In chapter two, I review the scholarly literature that examines the societal pressures that inform understandings of gender. I then explore schools as sites of friction for transgender students as well as transgender teachers. After assessing the reproduction of cultural norms with regards to transgender students, current scholarship on the role of gender in the classroom will be discussed as well as studies addressing the transgender student experience in the music classroom. The final section of the literature review focuses on [music] teacher identity leading to the experiences of transgender students and teachers in and out of the music classroom.

Chapter three, the methodology section, will provide insight into the ways in which narrative inquiry was used to empower the participants’ stories. In keeping with the presentation of my own story that anchors this opening chapter, I will employ the use of dialogue and critical storytelling to amplify the stories shared by three transgender music educators. As Adichie (2009) explains, the trouble with the single story is that it tends to emphasize “how we are different rather than how we are similar” (Adichie, 2009) and it is for that reason that through
chapters four, five, and six of this study will ensure that mine is not the only voice being heard, providing space for the voices of three participants to come to the foreground. The final chapter of this document serves as a reflection from the participant stories and details the insights gathered from spending time in their classrooms.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction

In this review of literature, current understandings of gender development are highlighted to ground the reader with specific terminology used throughout the remaining chapters. In addition, the role of gender in teaching and learning will be explored through the conceptual framework of gender facilitative schools, which leads to an examination of schools as sites of friction for transgender students, and subsequently trans teachers. Since transgender teachers have not been afforded the same attention from scholars that has been given to students (Pascoe, 2012, p. xiv), the teacher section of the literature is devoted to the few stories that discuss the experiences of transgender teachers in the field of education. Although much of the literature focuses on the transgender student’s experience, the final section of this review examines transgender scholarship from within the field of music education for students and teachers alike.

Gender Development

Societal pressures, socialization, and environmental contexts inform a person’s primary understandings of gender. In the early 1990s, researchers referred to the learning of gendered behavior as “sex role development” (Hort et al., 1991, p.195). In their research Hort et al. set out to understand the cognitive components of gender acquisition. And while much of their findings do not directly speak to the questions undertaken in this study, they did offer a useful metaphor for understanding how a person comes to know their gender:

The child’s acquisition of gender is most accurately compared to an intricate puzzle that the child pieces together in a rather idiosyncratic way. Specifically, the research of gender development increasingly shows that in order for the child to achieve a sensible model of gender, s/he must integrate many different components into a working
conceptual and behavioral framework that revolves around the definitions and implications of “male” and “female” (p. 196)

As such, the child assembles these various pieces to create their understanding of who they are as gendered persons that are then confirmed, or challenged, by the expectations of their family and other socialization agents, such as teachers, peers, or media (Anderson, 2018; Fagot, et al., 2000).

Scholars agree that gender is learned through a “particular gender script” (Wingrave, 2018, p. 590). Through the actions of adults, a child is made aware of the social, gendered expectations that are tied to their biological assignment at birth. Anderson (2018) confirms that “gender-specific expectations by socialization agents in turn affect interactions with the children, with the result of shaping gender behavior in children, whether with or without conscious intent” (p. 24).

Gender acquisition is also heavily impacted by the societal pressure to conform to one of two fixed choices for gender biology – male or female (Dietert & Dentice, 2013, p. 24) and further, parents and others usually assume that gender identity and biological assignment at birth align. The expectation that gender identity and biological sex are one and the same has created many problems for those who do not conform to the two-gendered classification system. As Dietert and Dentice (2013) explain:

When individuals deviate from gender binary arrangements by expressing gender norms and roles not associated with their biological assignment at birth, authorities submit control by utilizing gender binary discourse beginning in early socialization and lasting throughout the individual’s life. (p. 30)
In other words, in rejecting the biological assignment at birth, those who resist a two-gender classification system, challenge the inherent gender binary discourse. This socio-cultural coupling of gender and biology is problematic because people tend to reify the connection between gender and biological sex. It is common to see others through the familiar or normative characteristics of male and female which then obscures the existence of transgender, gender expansive, gender non-conforming, or gender queer individuals for whom these categories are not a good fit (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, p. 442).

Scholars assert that gender identity and gender expression, as well as sexual orientation, should be understood as discreet entities. Gender expression is the outward physical “manifestation of an individual’s sense of being masculine and/or feminine” (Anderson, 2020, p. 2). Put more simply, gender identity is the internal sense of self and gender expression is the external presentation of self. Healthy gender development consists of “trying on” (Anderson, 2018, p. 28) gender expressions, ways of presenting the self in public.

Ehrensaft, a developmental and clinical psychologist, suggests that the boundaries of the typical bi-fold (masculine or feminine) system should be blurred, reminding readers that, “gender is different for different people” (Ehrensaft, 2011, xi). Keo-Meier and Ehrensaft (2018) view the development of gender through a four-dimensional web of nature, nurture, culture, and time. They explain:

Imagine a spider web stretched out in a tree to get the visual image, a web that may change its dimensions over time as the spider enhances its home. The gender web is each child’s personal creation, spinning together the three major threads of nature, nurture, and culture that interface to allow the child to construct a gender self. Like fingerprints, no
two individuals’ gender webs will be exactly the same; unlike fingerprints, the gender web is not immutable—it will inevitably change over time. (p. 14)

This metaphorical web makes room for those whose gender identity does not align with their gender assigned at birth. The impact of the parent and other significant persons involved in life a child’s gender development is significant:

If parents grab the thread of the web as children are spinning it, and tell them what their gender has to be, rather than listening as children spell out their gender or rather than watching them do their own creative work, the web risks ending up as a tangled knot of threads rather than a beautifully spun web that shimmers and glows. Alternatively, if parents and the surrounding environment facilitate, protect, and respect children’s creative spinning, they stand to grow up gender healthy and proud. It is the role of the gender affirmative clinician to assure that the latter occurs. (Keo-Meier & Ehrensaft, 2018, p. 14)

Accordingly, teachers, peers, administrators, community members, and colleagues mirror the role of the parent in that they contribute to the web spinning of the transgender person, whether child or adult. The primary objective in utilizing this notion of a web is to ensure that transgender people are “free [to] explore a range of gender identities and expressions without external and rejecting forces impinging upon them” (Hidalgo et al., 2013, p. 288). These freedoms to explore consider the societal influences and languages that uphold binary portrayals of gender, thus hindering visibility and validation of the transgender person.

**Fluidity of Gender.** Although more scholars are beginning to consider gender fluidity, the influence of the gender binary remains a problematic framework for those exploring gender
identity. Fiani and Han (2019) deconstruct word transgender to express “‘trans’, meaning ‘across’ often implies that a person identifies opposite their sex assigned at birth” (p. 182). Further they agree that the binary considerations of moving from one gender to another “inadequately represents the vast spectrum of gender identities” (p. 182). Generally, cisgender and transgender people “experience their identities as one category and not the other” but that leaves little room for non-binary transpersons to define themselves (Hyde et al., 2019, p. 179).

The gender binary also impacts those persons who are transgender. The umbrella term, transgender, positions individuals in transition from their assigned sex at birth to the opposite sex, or as Stryker (2008) defines it as “the movement across a socially imposed boundary” (p. 1). The term transgender further perpetuates the gender binary and leads those who exist beyond or somewhere along a gendered spectrum feeling “not trans enough” (Garrison, 2018, pg 618).

Garrison (2018) explored existing understandings of the transgender umbrella, which was labeled by historian and theorist Susan Stryker (2004) whose work focuses on human sexuality and gender identity. Garrison described this umbrella as binary-identified and nonbinary-identified (Garrison, 2018, p. 615). For some, the use of this duality can cause a feeling of inadequacy in claiming space under the transgender label. A 19-year-old participant in Garrison’s study, who identifies as genderqueer, provided the following as an example of the struggle to use transgender as a defining term, stating:

I feel like the dominant narrative is that you have to medically get on hormones, or blockers, get surgery . . . [That’s] the central journey of what makes someone trans, and you’re not as legitimate if you don’t do those. (p. 625)

In exploring the constellation of gender identity further, Keo-Meier and Ehrensaft (2018) elected to use the term gender diverse “as the umbrella term that refers to this group of children
with two subcategories – transgender and gender expansive” (p. 6). In what remains of this dissertation considerations of gender expansiveness will be explored using the term transgender, as Garrison (2018) defined as binary-identified and nonbinary-identified.

While the inauthentic use of the label, transgender, can lead some individuals who are exploring their gender identity to “justify [their] existence as “gender-incongruent” (p. 633), some assert that gender identity is only to be expressed as (trans) man or (trans) woman, those transpersons whose gender identity is self-described as fluid feel invalidated by the construct of transgender (Sutherland, 2018, p. 3). Although problematic for some, each of this study’s participants agreed that utilizing the term transgender made visible their gender identities, further solidifying the use of the term transgender. It is for that reason, that instead of problematizing transgender as the scholars above, the term transgender will remain the primary means of communicating the fluidity of gender identity in the classrooms of the three participants.

One of the biggest concerns of educators has been their inability to challenge their preconceived notions of gendered bodies, which assumes that all students are either boys or girls. Smith and Payne (2015) in an interview-based study, found that “educators and policy makers generally fixate on fitting queer students into normative structures, rather than pursuing structural changes that could disrupt institutional privileging of gender conformity” (p. 36). The inclusion of transgender students in discussions surrounding gender identity has often been questioned (p. 35). Burns et al. (2016) traced barriers from primary school teachers to college and university professors as it pertained to transgender students in the classroom:

It was reported that there is also a general lack of understanding in educational institutions of what transgender issues are, including a lack of understanding around
terminology and what trans issues can mean for different people. This can result in sensitive issues not being dealt with properly. (p. 14)

Beauchamp and D’Harlingue (2012) recommend that the curriculum pursue topics of visibility and validation through integration and not through segregation of transpersons. In their scholarship, Beauchamp and D’Harlingue addressed gender and gender identity in the social sciences and determined that education often assumes a cisnormative approach to gendered bodies. Beauchamp and D’Harlingue (2012) stated:

Such linkage elides the existence and particularities of transgender and gender-nonconforming bodies and subjects on the one hand yet posits them as exceptions on the other. This combination stabilizes the normativity of hegemonic sex and gender embodiments by naturalizing nontransgender bodies. (p. 26)

Additionally, they argue that rather than seeing transgender and gender nonconforming people as a tool “for teaching primarily to nontransgender students” (p. 26), transgender and gender nonconforming people should share similar visibility to their cisgender counterparts in the classroom. It is the responsibility of all educators to acknowledge that “gender is an ongoing event, one that needs to be constantly challenged and questioned through its lived encounters” (Wells, 2018, 1546).

**Educational Sites of Friction for Transpersons**

Schools are crucial spaces for transgender and nontransgender students and teachers alike. It is in these spaces where many practicalities, such as dress codes, athletic teams, ensemble names, and other cis/het normative social functions, such as school dances, exist.

Bathrooms play a critical role in gendering students and teachers who are transgender. The bathroom is a space where “binary gender is produced and becomes embodied” (Cavanagh,
2010, p. 78). These spaces foster genderism, as Bilodeau described as “a forced social labeling process that sorts and categorizes all individuals into binary male or female identities” (2013, p. 75). Rasmussen (2009) contends that “toilets don’t just tell us where to go; they also tell us who we are, where we belong, and where we don’t belong” (p. 440). Additionally, the public restroom “represents a very potent and living practice of gender regulation” (Ingrey, 2012, p. 799).

Currently in the popular press, conversations about gender identity in schools have centered on creating inclusive classrooms for transgender students (Baum, 2022; Griffin & Ouellett, 2002; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Russell & McGuire, 2008; Vega et al., 2012). In opposition to trans student safety, many school districts, for example in Florida, Texas, and Virginia, have reversed protections for trans students (Diaz, 2022; Ernst, 2022; Stempel, 2022). These reversals have targeted trans students through many measures, such as denying trans student participation in sports, requiring that students use bathrooms according to their assigned sex at birth and most recently, in tracking the menstruation cycles in order to play on teams intended for players assigned female at birth. The latter was voted down in a 14 – 2 vote in an emergency meeting of the Florida High School Athletic Association’s board (McCammon, 2023).

In an attempt to ensure that transgender students feel as if they are welcome in their school and therefore classroom environments, Rands (2009), an independent scholar who focuses on queer and trans studies in the field of math education, began to explore the role, or the absence of, discussing gender in the classroom. Rands contends that the lack of understanding surrounding transgender students is because the content is “completely missing from the field of teacher education” (p. 421), and that “teacher education programs have the responsibility of
preparing teachers to support the growth of transgender individuals at all levels of the education system” (p. 422). Wells (2018) further exemplified this absence in an empirical study about transgender teachers in scholarship, reminding that the research that exists about trans teachers explores the ways cultural norms, about gender, are “(re)produced and continually (re)enforced” (1544).

**Typology of Gender in the Classroom.** Although the research has begun to consider transgender students in the classroom, Rands further explored the ways gender is performed in the classroom. Rands (2009) offers a typology that describes four primary ways in which gender education is performed: 1) gender-stereotyped education, 2) gender-free/gender-blind education, 3) gender sensitive education, and 4) gender-complex education. As these are described, the gender-complex approach holds promise for addressing gender identity in undergraduate education programs and for creating spaces for transgender students to thrive. Topics related to gender identity should be approached with sensitivity (Bilodeau, 2007), with acknowledgement of the challenges that come with being a transgender student in the classroom.

**Gender – Stereotyped Education.** Gender-stereotyped teachers create classrooms in which the dualistic approach to gender identity is preserved and reinforced by the use of phrases such as, “boys and girls” or by suggesting stereotypical behaviors such as girls like one type of book while boys like a different type (Rands, 2009, p. 425). In a gender-stereotyped classroom, gender expansive students might feel fearful and powerless to advocate for themselves against the authority of the teacher. This is a space in which conforming to one gender or another is celebrated and gender is only seen through societal expectations.

**Gender – Blind Education.** Many teachers question the necessity of including controversial conversations about gender in the classroom, maintaining a dualistic understanding
of gender. These teachers would be adopting a gender-free/gender-blind approach to teaching. This manner of teaching is based on the assumption that “gender can and should be ignored in educational contexts and that gender is irrelevant to education” (Rands, 2009, p. 425). In other words, teachers using this approach would believe that the boys and girls in their classes were all receiving the same treatment. For some, this may sound like a classroom that is attempting to promote gender equality, while for others, this approach still only honors two genders and leaves no room for gender expansive students. Even with the best of intentions, gender-blind teaching is not sensitive to the needs of all students.

In the gender-blind classroom, teachers may believe that they are honoring all of their students’ identities. This element of “sameness” disregards the unique identities of all, especially transgender and gender expansive students, in the classroom. Additionally, the gender-blind approach “reinforces cisnormativity by minimizing the particularities that are essential to trans and gender non-conforming students’ experiences” (Marx, et. al., 2017, p. 11).

**Gender – Sensitive Education.** A teacher in a gender-sensitive classroom still only sees gender through a binary lens while looking at the ways different behavioral or educational approaches might impact boys in one way and the same approach may impact girls differently. In a gender-sensitive classroom, teachers approach issues of gender individually rather than generally. In other words, the gender-sensitive teacher would look at the ways gender is operative in any given situation. Rands (2009, 2013) argues that the gender-sensitive educator thinks that a student’s behavior can be greatly attributed to their gender. Gender-sensitive teachers do their best to not allow a student’s gender to impose limitations on their development.

**Gender – Complex Education.** In order for transgender students to have success in navigating their gender identity, the gender-complex approach is one that does not assume that
gender is only seen as male or female. In this setting, gender is acknowledged as more fluid rather than stuck in the male/female dichotomy (Rands, 2009, p. 426). Teachers in the gender-complex classroom are challenged to look at gender in ways outside of the dominant notion of a two-gender system. Additionally, teachers in a gender-complex setting actively resist power structures by intentionally incorporating lessons of gender oppression in their classrooms in hopes of working towards change.

School personnel influence the experiences that transgender students face at school. These students often “rely on their teachers, counselors, and administrators to affirm their identities and model inclusivity” (Marx, et. al., 2017, p. 2). Beauchamp (2018) echoes the influential role of school personnel:

As the primary—perhaps only—faculty member on campus whose work focuses squarely on transgender studies, it is not unusual for students to share information with me about their gender identities, their medical transition plans, and their struggles to be treated properly by other teachers both in and out of the formal classroom. (p. 26)

In order for transgender students to succeed in their classrooms, the structure of the school needs to foster teachers’ and students’ awareness of gender identity, regardless of whether or not there is an “out” (Marx, et. al., 2017, p. 10) student in their classrooms.

Schools, as places of social interaction, construct environments which are gender stereotyped, gender blind, gender sensitive, and gender complex. These settings, intentional or not, are created for students and teachers alike. Although little, if any, research directly implicates the teachers in these environments, the context of schooling influences all involved. To understand the experiences of the teacher, it is necessary to understand how a school tends to its’ transgender students. In a gender blind, gender sensitive, or gender stereotyped classroom,
the transgender teacher would be expected to adhere to a male or female/Mr. or Ms. identity. In a gender complex classroom, a space where students’ gender identities are seen as fluid, the transgender teacher would “feel emotionally safe in order to [teach] effectively” (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 153). Additionally, schools as sites of friction for transgender students and teachers should take “coordinated steps to include gender-inclusive classrooms and schools” (Luecke, 2018, p. 281).

**The Gender Facilitative School**

“A child’s experience at school can significantly enhance or undermine their sense of self. Furthermore, children need to feel emotionally safe in order to learn effectively. A welcoming and supportive school where bullying and teasing is not permitted and children are actively taught to respect and celebrate difference is the ideal environment for all children. This is especially true for gender-variant and transgender children, who frequently are the targets of teasing and bullying. A child cannot feel emotionally safe, and will most likely experience problems in learning, if they regularly experience discrimination at school.” (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 153-154)

The element of safety at school is important and at times the harassment that tends to come from the peers of transgender students either goes unnoticed by faculty or the faculty inadvertently contribute to the negativity (Luecke, 2011, p. 132). GLSEN’s *Playgrounds and Prejudice* (2012) report stated that gender restrictive school settings lead to unsafe environments in which half of transgender students (56%) experience bullying when compared to that of their cisgender peers (33%). In addition to the bullying that transgender students face as part of this restrictive environment, the language discussing gender transition limits understanding of those who do not transition (Luecke, 2018, p. 271). This language, as described by Luecke (2018)
reinforces the dominant notion of gender by assuming that transgender students travel “a straightforward path from assigned gender to affirmed gender” (p. 271).

In order to create a space for their transgender students, teachers must educate themselves about the ways in which schools can be restrictive environments. Luecke (2018) developed a gender facilitative framework which details that schools should be a haven for transgender students. Gender facilitative school are those “that ensure safety, are child-centered, and have structures in place that nurture gender identity skills and peer support” (p. 273). In addition to creating a space where cisgender, transgender, and gender expansive students are safe together, the gender facilitative school “promote[s] expanded understandings of gender identities, language, and narratives that recognize each child’s unique experiences . . . and they understand developmental fluidity as gender unfolds” (p. 273).

Luecke (2011, 2018) has been working to understand the support structures for transgender students and their peers both through educational policy and in interactions with young children. Luecke (2011) states that, “all children need curricular mirrors to see themselves reflected and thus feel safe in being themselves, and they also need curricular windows to feel safe with the differences of others” (p. 117). Gender facilitative schools are spaces in which the identities of transgender students are honored through collaboration to help “navigate their gender journeys and develop as individuals and learners” (p. 270).

Gender facilitative schools not only begin to disrupt gender norms, they also work with their school community to foster acceptance. For example, faculty and staff experience more student-centered ways of working with micro-aggressions between students. Rather than punishing those responsible for these egregious acts a gender facilitative school focuses instead on educating instead of punishing students (Nadal, 2013, p. 158). This is done “so that they can
understand why their words or actions were hurtful” (Luecke, 2018, p. 274). Students and faculty in a gender facilitative school address “power dynamics and learning to respect the gender diversity of others” (Rands, 2013, p. 110).

A classroom using the gender facilitative framework allows students agency to explore their shifting identities and equips all students with language that meets the needs of transgender students. The gender facilitative school, much like the gender-complex classroom promotes:

…language and narratives that embrace students across the gender spectrum, challenge gender privilege and stereotyping through inclusive curricula and extracurricular activities, and implement gender nondiscrimination policies system-wide, advancing inclusion of gender expansive students. They promote expanded understandings of gender identities, language, and narratives that recognize each child’s unique experiences. (Luecke, 2018, p. 273)

Luecke’s (2018) gender facilitative framework is connected to Ehrensaft’s (2011) gender affirmative model of care, which honors the emerging identities of students. In connecting this to Ehrensaft (2011), the gender facilitative school acknowledges that “gender-identity formation does not end at a point in time but might extend” throughout the life of a student (p. 40). If those in education aim to provide equity for their transgender students, then gender fluidity must be explored and not tied to biological physiology. Blaise (2012) stated:

If we are serious about disrupting gender norms, then we as teachers must step out of our safety zones and actively respond to the gender discourses that children are drawing from when they are in the classroom and help them to challenge these taken-for-granted norms. (p. 182)
The gender facilitative framework centers the experiences of the transgender student and the ways teachers can support them but fails to address the concerns of the transgender teacher. To echo Blaise (2012), stepping outside of “safety zones” to “actively respond” is a regular occurrence in the daily lives of transgender teachers. Research related to transgender students that challenges dominant notions of gender could also prove beneficial for transgender teachers.

Thus far, the literature related to gender has not addressed the music classroom specifically. The remaining sections of this literature review will explore gender identity in the music classroom, primarily through the transgender music student experience. It will conclude by discussing the limited scholarship available on the transgender music teacher experience.

**Gender Identity in the Music Classroom**

The gender affirmative model, as defined by Ehrensaft (2017), is “a method of therapeutic care that includes allowing children to speak for themselves about their self-experienced gender identity and expressions and providing support for them to evolve into their authentic gender selves, no matter at what age” (p. 62). This model has also been helpful in music classrooms. Garrett and Palkki (2021) acknowledge that the interactions teachers have with students are often impacted by the experiences and beliefs that teachers bring with them to the classroom (p. 58). They listed four tenets of the gender affirmative model to characterize the school/classroom environment:

1. Focus on resilience, coping and wellness of young persons;
2. Respect for all gender identities, expressions, and presentations;
3. Respect for a TGE [Transgender Gender Expansive] person’s identity whatever it may be at a given point in time;
4. Reinforcement of gender equity and disapproval/disruption of gender inequity. (p. 58)
In using the gender affirmative model, music teachers can be better informed to teach the “people” in their ensemble (Garrett & Palkki, 2021, p. 163). When providing specific guidance for choral music educators, they believe that a rehearsal setting that effectively respects a person’s identity leads to a space in which the students “will engage in music making more deeply” (Garrett & Palkki, 2021, p. 164).

The influence of social constructions of gender has also been discussed as it pertains to musical experiences. Green (1994) reminded educators that gendered discourse in musical experiences “participate in the construction of our very notions of masculinity and femininity” (p. 103). In a later work by Green (2002) masculinity and femininity in terms of attitudes and instrument selection were explored (p. 138). Boys and girls are described as using music “as a shield that can hide, or as a piece of clothing that can express something about their gender as well as their sexuality, among other social constructions” (p. 142).

In these early works by Green, the fact that differences in gender were being discussed was monumental, but the vocabulary about gender in music education at the time was limited. Although popular imagination continues to see gender in terms of male and female, many music students may identify, either with both genders simultaneously, or neither male nor female (Diamond, 2020). While Green’s classroom acknowledged the differences between the musical experiences of boys and girls, closely aligning to Rands’ (2009) gender-sensitive classroom, it was lacking in language to uplift those students who do not consider themselves to be boys or girls.

**Concert Attire and Voice Parts.** Performance attire has long been an element of distress for transgender and non-binary students (Palkki, 2017). Scholars have established the use of student choice (Miller, 2016) or offering gender neutral attire to avoid binary visual
representations of voice parts, for example tenors and basses in tuxedos and sopranos and altos in dresses (Garrett, 2012; Garrett & Palkki, 2021; Rastin, 2016; Silvera & Goff, 2016; Sims, 2017). In addition to concert attire and formation of an ensemble, particularly for choral music, is the importance placed on voice and identity. It should not be assumed “that students’ voices and gender identities are linked” (Palkki, 2019, p. 139). Aguirre (2018) reminded music educators that “tenors and basses do not have to be male, while sopranos and altos do not have to be female” (p. 39). In many cases the choral director could assist students by rewriting voice parts to facilitate healthy vocal approaches that honor their identity (Garrett & Palkki, 2021).

In the sections that follow, research specific to transgender students and teachers, both in and outside of music education, will be explored. Two narratives will exemplify the transgender student experience in music through the stories of Rie (Nichols, 2013) and Skyler (Palkki, 2016). After briefly exploring those two stories, the literature will move to the familiar topic of teacher identity, beginning generally and moving to the transgender music teacher.

**Transgender Student Experience in Music Education**

**Rie.** One of the first works to portray was *Rie’s Story, Ryan’s Journey* (Nichols, 2013). Rie was a transgender music student whom Dr. Nichols in the beginning stages of her transition. In this work, Nichols and Rie chose to oscillate between the use of the female pronoun and name, Rie and the male pronoun and name, Ryan. Rie’s story invites readers into the life of a transgender music student while also encouraging disequilibrium through that oscillation. For example, when discussing sixth grade, Ryan “began middle school by unapologetically identifying as gay and cross-dressing in a more flamboyant manner that suited his personal taste” (p. 267).
The reader is given the opportunity to view this student’s life from one end of the
gendered spectrum (he) to the other (she). Both Rie and Nichols (2016) determined this was the
best way for readers to experience the discomfort of navigating a gendered spectrum. Nichols
writes, “Ryan thrived in his middle school music classes [where he] forged a small, close group
of friends from within this community and relied on their support throughout the difficult school
day” (Nichols, 2013, p. 268).

In her story, Rie recounted instances in which her teachers, administrators, and even the
school’s counselor neglected to comment on blatant homophobic remarks made towards her.
Although the counselor made “her office available as a refuge” she did not “intervene on Rie’s
behalf with the teachers and students to stop the incessant bullying” (Nichols, 2013, p. 267). This
lack of support continued until Rie’s forced departure from the school during her eighth-grade
year. It was not until her freshmen year at a different public school that she felt visible in the
choir when she was able to sing alto and wear the “feminine styled concert clothing” (p. 271).

In many of Rie’s situations, teachers appeared to be working with a gender-blind
approach to teaching (Rands, 2009). Her gender identity was neither supported nor rejected.
Before leaving eighth grade, Rie’s teachers may have made space for her to feel safe but
neglected to step in when her identity made her the target of much harassment. The teachers had
done Rie a “disservice by reinforcing expectations shaped largely by the very forces of privilege
and oppression” (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 140).

Skyler. At the time Palkki (2016) began working with Skyler, research about transgender
students in the music classroom was limited. In order to continue uplifting the voices of
transgender choral music students and their sense of visibility in their ensemble, Palkki (2016)
wanted “to describe if/how transgender students in secondary school choral programs were
supported by groups including their choral teachers, choral peers, and school administrators” (ii). His study focused on three transgender choral music students, Sara (she/her), Jon (he/him), and Skyler (they/them). In order to exemplify the non-binary transgender student, it is necessary to engage with Skyler’s story.

Skyler discussed their struggles with the change from using their birth name to using the name Skyler. In the choral setting, they articulated that they did not feel that their voice part and gender identity were connected (Palkki, 2016, p. 210). Skyler’s experience as a member of the choir was different at the junior high than when they went to high school. In the junior high setting, their teacher, Mr. Cooper, created an environment that modeled cisnormativity through the use of gendered language in the rehearsal setting and through gendered requirements for concert attire. In high school, Mr. Cooper had a different approach. Although Mr. Cooper mistakenly misgendered Skyler, his acknowledgement of these mistakes and quick fixes led to an environment of reciprocal respect and trust.

Although his classroom had operated under a gender-sensitive approach, Mr. Cooper grew to be more inclusive and observed a shift towards a gender-complex classroom, which facilitated safety and growth for Skyler. His dominant notions of the boys and girls in the classroom were challenged and rather than holding onto those limitations, Mr. Cooper grew into understanding gender in more complex ways, allowing room for Skyler’s, as well as other students’, gender identities to be thought of as fluid rather than strictly one or the other. In the choral setting, Skyler was safe and affirmed in their gender identity. And since Mr. Cooper knew that he played a vital role of support to Skyler and the rest of his students, he allowed Skyler, as the gender affirmative model reinforces (Anderson, 2018) the “opportunity to be their authentic gender-self, with freedom to fully express” their true identity (p. 30).
In Palkki and Sauerland’s (2018) work, they explored gender complexity in the music classroom. In their study considering gender complexity in the music classroom, they advocate for using Rands’ (2009) gender complex model for music teacher education. They highlighted this model of teacher education in order to facilitate conversations about variations of gender for teacher educators by:

(a) heightening their knowledge of gender complexity, (b) providing a curriculum that supports preservice and current teachers with more critical analysis and reflection on the impact of gender in curricula and classrooms, and (c) supporting preservice teachers in the application of gender-complex curricula in student teaching experiences and eventually in the workforce. (p. 77)

In general, Palkki and Sauerland (2018) emphasized the exploration of gender complexity for the transgender students in the classroom. They offered insight into the ways that choral music education majors might “consider the experiences of trans students by interviewing choral ensemble conductors at their college/university or surrounding high schools and churches to determine whether a trans person would be welcome in a “men’s” or “women’s” choir” (p. 78). Additional conversations in their study included the importance of understanding the possible “connections of gender identity and the voice for trans and nonbinary students” (p. 78).

Teacher Identity

Teacher identity has long been a topic of interest for researchers (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011; Jansz & Timmers, 2002; Pellegrino, 2018). At different points in the career of a teacher, their concept of self, of their teacher identity, varies. Yuan and Lee (2015) found that learning to be a teacher is “essentially a socialization process” (p. 471) in which teacher cognition and emotion are important factors in constructing a teacher identity. Akkerman and Meijer suggest
defining such identity “as an ongoing process of negotiating and interrelating multiple I-positions in such a way that a more or less coherent and consistent sense of self is maintained through various participations and self-investments in one’s (working) life” (p. 315).

Identity development is context dependent, multiple and conflicting. In different teaching situations, different selves move to the foreground. The tensions that come with such a shift in understanding of self should not cease to exist when developing identities, rather the tension should be utilized as a resource to assist music teachers with the growth of new “I-positions” in response to that tension. An “I-position” according to Akkerman and Meijer (2011) is defined as a viewpoint of self, moving “from one to the other position, as such, result[ing] in an identity that is continuously (re) constructed and negotiated” (p. 311). In their work, Akkerman and Meijer (2011) established that identity is not fixed but instead “an ongoing process of interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences” (p. 310) that “changes according to the type of situation one finds oneself in” (p. 312).

Wrestling with teacher identity can lead to an overwhelming “focus… on their own fears, their actions and words” (Hendricks, 2018, p. 37). What happens when transgender is added to a teacher’s identity? Butler (2004) posed questions that challenge these entrenched notions of gender that continue to perplex scholars and educators: “What counts as a person? What counts as a coherent gender? . . . Whose world is legitimated as real?” (p. 58). Although there is no simple answer to these questions, it is these questions that have prompted further examination of the experiences of transgender music educators in the music classroom.

Transgender music students are consistently navigating a cis/het normative world (McBride, 2016; Minette, 2018; Paparo & Sweet, 2014), illuding that the “real world” that Butler proposed is that of cisgender or nontransgender (Beauchamp & D’Harlingue, 2012) persons. In
music education, the limited research on transgender teachers has prompted further examination of transgender music teacher identity.

**Music Teacher Identity.** While teachers struggle with their transitional identities from student to teacher, music teachers struggle not only with that transition but also in navigating their role from musician to teacher (Garnett, 2014; Pellegrino). Ballantyne (2005) added another layer to this dichotomy through her study on fifteen early career teachers in which participants identified with one of three categories, “a musician, who happens to be teaching; a music teacher; or a teacher, who teaches music” (p. 5).

Wiggins (2011) also contemplated musician identity and teacher identity. Her study, although not connected to transgender music teachers, explored the interaction between vulnerability and agency in both becoming a musician and becoming a music teacher (p. 356). In taking risks, both musically and personally, Wiggins implies that the way to reach visibility is to first experience vulnerability.

A challenge to this notion of vulnerability is that of the school climate, which impacts the perceptions of visibility and validation for transgender students as well as transgender teachers. Not only are transgender teachers negotiating their identities as musicians and teachers but are also members of a marginalized group where sharing their identities might be seen as an immoral act (Panetta, 2021, p. 24). Many transgender music teachers navigate their identities as they fit in with the heteronormative community (McBride, 2016; Minette, 2018; Paparo & Sweet, 2014).

**Transgender Teacher Identity and Experience**

The stories that follow will summarize the teaching experiences of three transgender educators, only one of which is in music education. Illustrated throughout these stories are
“similar contours of experience” (Richardson, 1997, p. 19) with the transgender student experience, but witnessed from the teacher’s perspective.

**Kelly.** McCarthy (2003) explored the life of Kelly, a masculine presenting English teacher who was assigned female at birth (AFAB). Kelly was “out as transgender to her friends and family, but [was] not identified as transgender at school” (p. 172). Kelly found that it was easier to come out as gay instead of honoring her masculine gender identity, which led to an experience that many LGBTQ+ educators fear. One afternoon, Kelly noticed that two students were not where they were supposed to be and confronted them in the school hallway:

> Just in my confronting them, they turned on me and started to call me a dyke and a lot of really foul lesbian slurs . . . I didn’t back down to them, I wasn’t afraid of them. I wasn’t intimidated, I just treated them like I would treat any kid who was being disrespectful . . .

> I felt that there was a lesson that those kids needed to learn . . . that it was not okay for them to attack my sexuality, not just because it’s not nice, but that level of disrespect to an authority figure in school was a huge problem. (pp. 176-177)

After their two-day dismissal, the students came back to school and made threats to Kelly, which earned them a 10-day suspension. Kelly did not feel that these two students were punished in a way that was suitable to the severity of their disrespect. She worried that if these two individuals were confident enough to intimidate a teacher in this manner, that they would have no problem causing such harm to the kids who were also gay. Kelly reflected on the visibility that her masculine gender expression had given her:

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1 In McCarthy’s work, the feminine pronouns are used to describe Kelly. “Socially, Kelly’s experience of herself as transgender is in some ways reliant on her interactions with the external world. As she describes, she does not ‘necessarily feel all that trans’ until she compares herself to others” (p. 179).
If I didn’t look gay, those boys would not have been able to harass me in that way . . . It was because of the way I looked that they could harass me and that it was legitimized. (p. 177)

A secondary, though still important consideration of the struggles that transgender teachers face, are the particularities of feeling visible through attire. Kelly shared with McCarthy:

So when I walk in the classroom at the beginning of the school year, the kids all look at me sort of suspiciously, and we’d get it all out there right away because I might get some kid who says, “Are you a dyke?” And I’d say that at some point, we’re gonna build a relationship and get to know each other and that would be a question and a conversation that I’ll be happy to have with them…that I’m not going to get personal with them until we build a relationship that allows for that kind of discussion, but that I really hope that they follow up with me on that question down the road. And no one ever has the guts to do it. (p. 174)

Kelly’s choice of attire that represented a more masculine-centered appearance may have allowed a more comfortable presentation of self, but it was never something that was discussed as it was with cisgender colleagues.

So I’d be all dressed up and I’d be feeling good about myself and then I’d walk into school and feel like, the very clothing and look that makes me feel good about myself is the thing that makes people sometimes uncomfortable. And it makes people never make mention of my appearance. So that I never get that experience that other [cis]people get of, “You look nice today,” or “That’s a nice shirt,” or, “What a great color on you.” I
don’t get those social pleasantries and compliments, because to point out my appearance would be uncomfortable for people. (p. 174)

The visibility of Kelly’s masculine gender expression negatively impacted perceptions of being validated as a teacher (Hubbs, 2010). Although Kelly’s is the story of one trans-identified teacher, McCarthy insists that further research is necessary to explore the impacts the school environment has on its transgender teachers. Kelly’s feelings of safety came from the limited guidelines from administration for responding to hateful language.

**Ned.** Harris and Jones (2014) highlighted the educational journey of Ned, a transgender high school teacher in Australia. Ned’s identity began as something that was understood or seen, as a lesbian, masculine-presenting female, but that intelligibility shifted to something that was less visibly understood while he was negotiating his transition from visible lesbian to less visible, transman (p. 20).

Ned’s willingness to inhabit the role of the “visible token trans” teacher had a significant impact on not only the students in his school, but also on his personal decision to publicly transition (Harris & Jones, 2014, p. 17). In an interview, Ned shared a statement of his ambivalence to beginning masculinizing hormone therapy as well as the ways in which the visible nature of his transitioning gender identity was helpful to students:

I definitely put off taking hormones because I was afraid of what would happen, and I didn’t want to give up teaching. I do think that having ‘out’ teachers makes a big difference for kids. And I think that publicly transitioning, as painful as it is in an ongoing sense at work, is something that’s going to affect the kids that I come into contact with. (p. 22)
Ned mentioned the importance of cultivating relationships with his students as a transman, “I think teaching is about relationships. And if you are not a person, then you are not building relationships with the kids” (p. 19).

**Melanie.** Melanie’s story is one of the first, if not the first, research study into the experiences of a transgender music teacher. Bartolome (2016) documented Melanie’s understanding of her own identity as she transitioned from *deadname*² (he/him) to Melanie (she/her). Bartolome’s re-telling of Melanie's story, affords readers the opportunity to experience the struggles Melanie faced as she made a series of transitions; from *deadname* to Melanie, and finally from Melanie to Miss Stanford.

Melanie confronted anxieties surrounding her gender presentation, as she questioned whether she passed as female or whether her students were going to know that she was transgender. For Melanie, daily misgendering impacted her ability to feel seen. She explained:

> Being referred to as he or him, it was always kind of a moment of recognition: ‘Oh yeah, I’m trans and I have this problem because people are seeing me like this still, even though I am trying for them not to.’ There wasn’t ever really a space where somebody was always using the correct pronouns for me all the time. (p. 37)

Her identity as transgender was only visible through the mistakes of those around her. Peers still saw her as *deadname* and some even refused to refer to her as Melanie or use female pronouns.

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² A deadname is the name given to a trans person at birth that they no longer use. Gaskins and McClain (2021) argue that “the continued reference to a dead name or misgendering is an indignity that can resurrect past trauma” (para. 3). Although Bartolome’s study utilizes Melanie’s deadname, the literature review in a dissertation about trans visibility made a conscious decision to avoid the use of her deadname. Further importance about naming will follow in the relational ethics section of Chapter 3.
Melanie’s decision to share her story was not an attempt to speak for others in her position, but to encourage her cisgender counterparts to advocate for young transgender students:

Being transgender is not easy. I educated myself so that I could properly advocate for myself, but not all transgender people have the strength or ability to do that. My hope is that these stories provide some insight and encourage you to advocate for musicians like me, people who may not even know what support they need. (p. 43).

Bartolome (2016) explored concerns that Melanie had about the ways her gender identity could be the cause of added stressors during her student teaching experience.

Melanie’s identity as transgender caused “a risk to employment stability, personal safety, and possibly family relations, because of the widespread prejudice and substantial transphobia that out transpeople face” (Roen, 2001, p. 504). Melanie reflected on her concerns that her gender identity was to blame for not being offered teaching positions:

I went to the Texas Music Educators Association Conference in February and I ran into my old AP Music Theory teacher from high school. He said, ‘I probably shouldn’t tell you this, but my daughter was actually on one of the committees that you interviewed with.’ And then he said, ‘I hate to say it, but you might want to move out of Texas if you want to look for jobs. You might want to go somewhere less conservative.’ . . . I hate the fact that I would have to leave my home state to have a better life (Bartolome, 2016, p. 40)

Melanie ultimately found an elementary music teaching position without having to leave Texas. In this position, she grew confident in introducing herself as Miss Stanford to her students and was able to express her gender as Miss Stanford with her colleagues.
Closing

In this review of literature, current understandings of gender development were highlighted. Additionally, the role of gender in teaching and learning was explored through the conceptual framework of gender facilitative schools which provided examples of the ways in which schools act as a site of friction for transgender students and trans teachers. In the classroom, Rands (2009) troubled the two-gender system and introduced a gender complex approach, enabling cisgender teachers to take a critical look at their beliefs about gender and to think of gender as more fluid rather than static.

In both the field of education and the subfield of music education, the sparse amount of literature established that transgender teachers struggle with issues of visibility and validation similarly to those struggles faced by transgender students. Although Wiggins’ (2011) did not specifically highlight the transgender music teacher, her observations about the important of vulnerability in the formation of teacher identity is meaningful and connects to the stories of the three transgender music teachers that are the focus of this study as they wrestle with visibility and validation in their classrooms and larger school communities.

In the chapter that follows, narrative inquiry, more specifically critical storytelling, will be discussed as a framework for engaging the lived experiences of the study participants and its promise for providing visibility and validation through storying.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In this study, I sought to gather, contemplate, and present stories of transgender music educators through a narrative inquiry. I chose a narrative approach to explore notions of visibility and validity of transgender music educators, not for the purpose of seeking “certainty about correct perspectives” (Barone, 2007, p. 466), but to encourage readers to “interact with the text” (Stauffer, 2014, p. 173), where they might … “live the experiences vicariously . . . to understand the circumstances in which the narrator was immersed during the events described” (Albert & Couture, 2014, p. 804).

Stauffer (2014) explains that narrative inquiry in music education generally follows pathways laid out by one of three scholars: cognitive psychologist, Jerome Bruner; education researchers, Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly; and academic critical storyteller, Thomas Barone. Stauffer’s overview of these pathways began with Bruner’s concept of understanding “how people in general see and tell about themselves and their lives” (p. 168), then moved to Clandinin and Connelly’s narrative framework of “the use of story as a means of interpreting experience” (p. 170), and ended with critical storytelling as a means to promote critical reflection (Barone, 2007, p. 466). In this chapter I discuss how each of these approaches inform the methodological framework for this study and the presentation of my findings as stories of individual experience.

Additionally, I detail the methods pertaining to participant selection, data collection, member checking, and the procedures for narrative data analysis. In the final sections of this chapter, I contemplate my role as the researcher, the affordances and limitations (Nichols, 2015) of my status as an insider to the transgender music teaching community and detail the methods of establishing the trustworthiness of the study.
A Framework for Narrative Inquiry

Stauffer (2014) acknowledged that narrative work often blurs the lines between each of these pathways. Narrative inquiry is a flexible and responsive method, it “is human centered” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 13) and “is a more reflective process” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 44). The following methodological frameworks contributed important concepts for the study: 1) self-making, 2) interpreting experience, and 3) storytelling. Self-making aided in interpreting human connections made throughout the course of the study, which provided insight into the experiences of the participants and their students, leading to storytelling to share connections and experiences.

**Self-Making.** Bruner’s narrative mode of research is contrasted with a “logico-scientific mode” of thought in which “the mind is an instrument of reason” (Stauffer, 2014, p. 166). He explained that although these ways of thinking are constructed differently, they are central to constructing interpretations and connections between ourselves and others, not looking to solve problems, but locating “them in such a way as to make them comprehensible” (Bruner, 1991, p. 72). Bruner centered the examination of trouble or plight as one role for narrative inquiry and through the stories of three transgender music teachers, readers will examine their plight and as well as be invited to understand the importance of human connection as it intersects with the teachers’ feelings of visibility and validation in their classrooms.

**Interpreting Experience.** Clandinin and Connelly (2000) constructed narrative inquiry as a method of researching experience. Grounded by the works of John Dewey, this narrative approach seeks insight into the human experience as an intersection of contexts, relationships, interactions, and emotions (Dewey, 1938 p. 294). Clandinin and Connelly “focus neither exclusively on a person’s thoughts and feelings nor on studies of social conditions” but on the
relationship with the researcher and the context in which these experiences happen (Stauffer, 2014, p. 171).

In keeping with Clandinin and Connelly’s four-dimensions of experience (2000), I invited stories that not only focused on the personal feelings of each transgender teacher, but also provided insight into their societal contexts within the school environment, as well as their teaching experiences. Transgender music educators were invited to interpret the ways in which their school context, relationships and interactions with colleagues, administration, students and their families, influenced their emotional and human interactions with and thru music.

**Critical Storytelling.** Barone (1992) championed critical storytelling as a means of qualitative problem solving as modeled by Ecker (1966). Barone (1992) contends that critical storytelling is worthwhile when it promotes two kinds of activities (p. 142). First, as an:

1. Introduction to each other of school people (especially teachers to their students) who are locked within present system of schooling, enabling them to hear. . . each other’s heartbeats.

2. The second is inquiry into how schools may be transformed so that they people who live there no longer need to be introduced to each other by external intermediaries such as educationalists. (p. 142)

In using storytelling through Bruner’s (1986) understanding of narrative inquiry provided the ability to gain a “sense of self and our sense of others in the social world around us” (p. 69). Through storytelling an “empathetic understanding” of the challenges faced by transgender music teachers will be explored (Barone, 2000, p. 129).

In this study, critical storytelling is an avenue for the participant’s stories “to open the spaces in between for mutual meanings to arise, to deepen one’s own sense of humility and
humanity, to open places in which we become visible to each other” (Stauffer, 2016). In utilizing this narrative study to become visible, the transgender music teachers stood ready to help other trans music teachers to “recognize [their] life and truth in what you say. . .decreas[ing] the terrible sense of isolation that we have all had too much of” (Lamott, 1995, p. 209). Opting for critical storytelling as a means of excavating (Kim, 2015) experience, I aim for the trans music educators’ stories to serve as an introduction among school people (especially transgender music teachers to their students), who are locked within a binary system of gender so that, as Barone intones, schools may be transformed, and that my work as a scholar is no longer needed as an intermediary.

**Participant Selection**

Upon approval from the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board, (IRB, see Appendix A) I searched for K-12 transgender music teachers who would be deliberately selected for the confidence that they had in their gender identity. While admittedly hard to define, I sought participants who expressed a certainty or a sense of self-peace about their gender identity and with the capacity to reflect on their personal and career journeys. Participants were three music educators who:

- self-described as transgender whether binary or non-binary,
- had more than one year of teaching experience,
- were out to their school community; meaning this teacher had established their transgender identity within their school community.

I recruited participants through social media and a list of those locations are included in Appendix B. After vetting by the group moderators, the following initial announcement was posted on the site.
July 3, 2022:

Hi friends,
I’m M.R.. I believe I have posted here before about my experiences as a transgender choral music teacher and I am now looking to swap stories with other TGE choral music teachers out there for my dissertation.
I’d love to hear about YOUR experiences as a TGE choral music teacher. If you are interested in hearing more about the dissertation, feel free to comment below and I will reach out privately via Facebook messenger.
Looking forward to generating conversation with you.

M.R.
(they/them)
PhD Candidate in Music Education
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
IRB Approved: 6.29.2022

Note: I will be unable to respond to your stories in the comments section of this post. It is important that you comment only of your interest and I will then reach out to you.

Several interested music teachers commented, and with many challenging that participants were limited to choral music educators. After due consideration, I decided to widen the scope and encourage all trans music teachers to consider participating.

July 14, 2022:
Just re-sharing my post from July 3 – I am seeking participants for a study about transgender (binary and non-binary) music teachers. OG [original] post only named choral music teachers – that has been adjusted to include ALL who are trans.

Hi friends,
I’m M.R.. I believe I have posted here before about my experiences as a transgender choral music teacher and I am now looking to swap stories with other trans music teachers out there for my dissertation.
I’d love to hear about YOUR experiences as a trans music teacher. If you are interested in hearing more about the dissertation, feel free to comment below and I will reach out privately via Facebook messenger. 

Looking forward to generating conversation with you.

M.R.
(they/them)
PhD Candidate in Music Education
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
IRB Approved: 6.29.2022

Note: I will be unable to respond to your stories in the comments section of this post. It is important that you comment only of your interest and I will then reach out to you.

Participants

Initially, eight transgender music teachers contacted me via Facebook Messenger. After brief discussions about their teaching experience and time in the field, two of the eight were immediately eliminated because they were college music instructors. Of the six potential participants only three continued to express interest in the study once they learned details and signed the participant consent form located in Appendix C. The participants understood that their participation in this study was voluntary, and each participant was told that they could opt out of the study as needed.

Iroh, Michaela, and Lily³ were the participants in this study:

Iroh (he/they). I first talked with Iroh on Facebook messenger in early July. Iroh is a fourth-year teacher who currently teaches at a public charter school in the Mountain West subregion of the Western United States. They identify as trans-masculine, non-binary and

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³ These are the names that the participants elected to use for this study, not all of them are pseudonyms. Further conversation about the use of pseudonyms in trans studies can be found in the relational ethics section of this chapter.
requested that students utilize, *Mx.*, as their honorific. They had just undergone top surgery\(^4\) when they saw my post and were anxiously awaiting their return to school to stand proudly in front of their students. Iroh is the only music teacher for grades 9-12 at their school where they teach jazz band, orchestra, beginning choir, advanced choir, two sections of guitar, and two sections of music theory.

**Michaela (she/they).** Michaela was the second person to continue conversations with me via Facebook messenger. Michaela described her identity as trans-feminine, non-binary. She has been teaching for the last three years in the greater Chicagoland area. Michaela is employed in a public school system, teaching high school music, grades 9-12. Her day consists of one choral ensemble, two sections of beginner guitar, one section of world music, and one section of freshmen advisory. In addition to her teaching duties, Michaela serves as the faculty advisor to the LGBT student organization. Michaela has her PhD in Musicology and utilizes that strength to facilitate her world music course with multicultural music making for her students, most of whom are English language learners.

**Lily (she/her).** Lily is a transgender woman living in the New England region of the Northeastern United States. For the last three and a half years, she has been teaching music in grades pre-K through 8 at an independent school for gifted students. Lily’s class schedule consists of two sections of 4\(^{th}\) grade beginning strings, which is a new program this semester, as well as one 7\(^{th}\) and 8\(^{th}\) grade choir, and varying sections of general music for grades 1-8. She is also one of two faculty advisors to the student affinity group for LGBTQ students in grades 4-8.

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\(^4\) Top surgery, in this instance, is another name for masculinization of the chest when a surgeon removes breast tissue and may reposition and reshape the nipples for a more gender affirming presentation of self.
In addition to gathering written consent from each participant, I also obtained permission to observe these teachers from their schools. Lily and Iroh both taught at independent schools and I only needed permission granted from the schools’ lead administrator, but access into Michaela’s school required specific background check evidence for entry (see Appendix D). Following guidance from the UIUC IRB, all three participants were provided with a parent letter, to send to parents and guardians informing them of my presence in their child’s classroom (see Appendix E).

**Data Collection**

Data collection for this study took place in the fall semester of 2022 and consisted of “excavating stories” (Kim, 2015, p. 155) through interviews, participatory conversations via text messaging, in-class observations, and the collection of artifacts related to their school environment such as gender support plans. I also maintained a researcher journal as another means of collecting data.

**Interviews.** Since the nature of narrative inquiry prioritizes the relationship between researcher and participant, I met with Iroh, Michaela and Lily outside of their classrooms twice to discuss their lives as transgender music teachers in their community. These interviews covered topics such as their interest in teaching music, elements of self-discovery, challenges in representing an authentic version of self in the classroom, perceptions of visibility as it relates to their gender identity, the support of administration, and other areas of relevant discussion.

In my approach to conducting these interviews, I owned my role as “knowledge seeker” and the participant was seen as the “knowledge holder” (Kim, 2015, p. 158). I invited participants “to speak in their own voices, to express themselves freely, deciding where to start their story” (Kim, 2015, p. 165). Kim (2015) recommended that the life story interview be
conducted in two parts – the narration phase and the conversation phase (p. 167). The narration phase followed a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix G) that consisted of open-ended questions designed to propel the story forward. In the conversation phase, the participant and I worked together in dialogue “. . .to understand important aspects of the interviewee’s life, which in turn…systematically create[d] knowledge that illuminate[d] human experience” (Kim, 2015, p. 169).

An initial interview with each of the three participants took place over Zoom. Each participant spoke with me for approximately ninety minutes. Additional conversations took place during observations as well as at the end of their school day. After initial drafts of participant stories were written, I met with each of them for a final time over Zoom. In that conversation, we caught up on their lives in and out of the classroom and covered specific elements for clarification purposes before final drafts were sent to them for member-checking.

**Participant Journals.** I asked participants to keep a study journal as another form of data collection. Throughout the course of the study, I offered specific prompts for the first and final entries, while the entries between the first and the last were open-ended and intended for personal reflection on their individual teaching experiences. There were also journal prompts (see Appendix H) provided based on my observations in the classroom.

Giraud (1999) advocated for journal writing as an important tool in qualitative data collection:

Journals, as records of participant experience, can be compared advantageously to interviews as sources of evaluative data. First, journals allow participants to reflect on their experience without the influence of interviewer or interview questions. Second, journals can be solicited from all participants with a minimum of researcher time and
participant inconvenience; interviews require scheduled appointments, and often are impossible to impose on all participants due to time and resource constraints. Third, journal entries can be collected on a regular schedule, and therefore can be expected to be contemporaneous accounts of participants' experience; interview data is generally retrospective and thus limited by recall interference. Finally, journal entries can be solicited as typed manuscripts or on computer disks, allowing the researcher to easily manipulate the data with software designed for qualitative data analysis; interview data is generally recorded and must be transcribed. (pp.3-4)

Since journals served as a “powerful way for individuals to give accounts of their experiences” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 102), I encouraged participants to choose any medium of constructing these journals, either as written reflections, Facebook posts, or voice memos. Each participant was assigned a specific folder, on a secure drive, to access these prompts.

**Participatory Conversations.** Swain and King (2022) define a participatory conversation as “interactive dialogue between the researcher and another person”, in this case the participants (p. 2). This is different from casual conversations that happened in the field. I initiated weekly text messages as a means of keeping in touch with the participants and through them I gathered important information outside of the topics that I had planned to cover in interviews, observations, and the participants journaling prompts. This emergent means of data collection allowed for a richer understanding of the participant and their specific teaching and living contexts (Swain & King, 2022, p. 3). Swain and King do not argue that participatory conversations are more valuable than structured interviews or other forms of data collection, they instead offer that, “there is often less performativity, and so they [the researcher] may get nearer
to the reality of individuals’ experiences, values, and perceptions” (p. 8). Below are two examples of texts I sent to the Iroh, Micheala and Lily:

Utilizing weekly text messages allowed me to connect with participants while I was outside of their teaching environments. In many instances, participants were unable to respond to journal prompts but were quick to respond to text messages. In a 2017 study, Willoughby and Liu explored the ways in which the narratives found in text messages could “elicit audience member’s attention and message processing” (p. 77). Since the average person shares an average of thirty text messages per day (p. 79), it quickly became one of the most informative ways of retrieving data from the participants.

Artifacts. Kim (2015) described artifacts as “cabinets of curiosities” that assisted the researcher to “excavate further stories” from participant storytellers (p. 177). In addition to the
journals mentioned above, artifacts for this study included informal Facebook posts, text messages, photographs, and other supplemental documents provided to me from each participant. Participants readily provided artifacts while I was on location (see Appendix J).

**Observations.** Another form of data generation took place in the form of observation. After the initial interview, plans to travel to each participants’ destination were made to conduct two consecutive observations. The first observation provided the social context for each participant, while the second day of observations promoted an understanding of the ways participants moved through their day.

During the observation process I attended to the setting, events, and gestures (Glesne, 2011, p. 69-70). I took field notes, both descriptive and analytic, of the ways in which participants socially interacted with those in their environments and the ways their “postures, positions, and movement” impacted the engagement of those in their space (Glesne, 2011, p. 70). Each observation was followed by a conversation with the participant that covered the day’s events, any questions we had for each other, and clarification of social interactions between students and colleagues both inside and outside the classroom.

**Researcher Journal.** Like an analytic memo, my researcher journal entries acted as “potential sites in which rich analysis may occur” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 45). Due to the personal nature of this study, using a memo, or a journal, as a means of data reflection was beneficial because it allowed me to see “emergent patterns, categories and sub-categories, themes, and concepts” (p. 44), but also provided a space to reflect on my own interactions with participants and feelings that occurred during our time together. The journal was also a data source and catalyst for the autethnographic sections of this study.
Role of the Researcher

When I first began my doctoral coursework, I never would have thought I would learn as much about myself as I learned about the field of music education. In my first semester I enrolled in a class that addressed methods of research that centered on the participant experience through narrative inquiry and arts-based research. It was in that course where I came face-to-face with a person that I had resisted confronting for the past 38 years. Instead of suppressing her any longer, I allowed myself the space to explore the impact that my gender identity had on my development as a scholar, as a choral music educator, and as a human being. As a transgender, non-binary choir director, I acknowledged that my researcher role as well as my role as subject in the autoethnographic portions, presented both affordances and limitations to this study.

As a member of both the trans community and the scholarly community of music education, I negotiated between thinking about my position of power as a scholar and respected the stories of participants whose experiences did closely parallel mine. I went in with an awareness that my stance as an insider to this community engendered confidence and comfort to those who were in dialogue with me, and I, through their stories, served as an experienced guide for outsiders to learn and unlearn as they explored their understanding of gender by reading about the experiences of transgender music teachers.

I was also aware of the limitations that my status as an insider had on this study. My own personal traumas, while important to the autoethnographic portions of this study, were monitored during both the collection and analysis of participant stories. Throughout this study, I had the following questions in mind: “Whose story is being written? Whose purposes are being furthered? Who is making the decisions?” (Nichols, 2015, p. 450).
Affordances. Veale (2017) proposed two major benefits of being an insider when completing transgender research: 1) through increased visibility, the perception that the trans person “is to be seen only as the object of curiosity aims to be dispelled” (p. 121), and 2) to provide trans people a “sense of empowerment in enhancing the trans voice as it speaks out about health, education, and research” (p. 122). In offering a space where trans music teachers were seen as human instead of as object, they gained a sense of empowerment in being in conversation with me.

As a transgender singer, choir director, and researcher, my experiences brought a wealth of knowledge that allowed me to utilize these identities to develop rapport and position myself as someone who assisted in sharing the stories of other transgender music educators. Through my individual gender identity and presentation, participants and readers may be confident that I engaged in interpreting these experiences through a personal understanding that is not available to a cisgender researcher. This emic perspective as stated by Yin (2010) “attempt[ed] to capture participants’ indigenous meanings of real-world events” (p. 11).

Limitations. The burdens and pitfalls of being an intermediary of the experiences of transgender music teachers are plenty. Although my insider status proved to be helpful in the recruitment process and in developing rapport with participants, it also led me to making specific assumptions about the trajectory of participant stories. Additionally problematic in holding an insider status was for me to remember “holding membership in a group does not denote complete sameness within that group” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60). While I anticipated many similar themes between the stories of participants and my own story, my careful consideration of my own experiences, such as those shared in my narrative in Chapter One, bolstered my ability to “bracket my assumptions” and personal biases (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 55)
Another limitation of my position was that of risking that my past personal traumas might compromise my scholar perspective. Through the triggering of my past, was the possibility of making conclusions or otherwise influencing the writing of the stories such that I “exclude significant events or impart an illusion of resolution” (Nichols, 2013, p. 275). I was “wary of projecting [my] views onto participants or the data analysis” (Greene, 2014, p. 4). And although it remains true that my own personal journey as a transgender music teacher is what motivated me to share these stories, I continued to be aware of the ways that our shared experiences engaged my biases and impact my ability to reflect on the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).

Data Analysis

As Stauffer (2014) explains, interpretive processes are “invented within the context of each study and comprised of multiple recursive moves between data, work in the field, literature and theory, and writing” (p. 179). Narratives should equip readers with stories of life events that provide “an opportunity to understand the human condition” (Stauffer, 2014, p. 163). These stories are not free from the context from which they lived. Since narratives “aim at meaning rather than truth,” data analysis primarily consisted of the researcher reading, writing, and in some cases, rewriting texts (Stauffer, 2014, p. 163). Rewriting texts is a process that Stauffer (2014) described to “deepen and refine understanding with each pass” (p. 178). This method of discovery allowed me to understand the participants’ stories through their voice instead of privileging the voice and priorities of my own biases. Analysis varied by context and was conducted with the understanding that there existed an infinite number of interpretations for any one story (p. 179).
Polkinghorne (1995) described narrative analysis as “the process of . . . synthesizing the data rather than a separation of it into its constitute parts” (p. 15). In other words, the narrative analytical process focused on more than the stories being shared by using recursive movements from the whole story or parts of the whole story, filling gaps by using narration. Analysis was more than a simple transcription of a story and showed the “significance of the lived experience” of the participant (Kim, 2015, p. 197). Additionally, narrative analysis used the data to make content understandable in a way that appeals to its audience.

Findings and Researcher Contribution. The stories shared during the collection period constituted the form of this narrative study. Narrative research, in this setting, encouraged the reader to be the author of what is to come (Stauffer, 2014, p. 180). Used in this way, storytelling in music education is a “scholarly engagement with stories of experience as a means of interrogating critical matters in education, in music, in the world” (p. 180). While going through the stories of each participant, I followed Chase’s (2003) suggestion and “interpret[d] what is being said and try to articulate [my] reasons – give evidence – for [my] interpretations” (p. 92).

Member Checking. In exploring the collected conversations throughout this project, I was in constant consideration about the ways in which “power and control [was] shared with the participant” (Nichols, 2013, p. 264). Through shared power, participants assisted in determining which parts of their stories would be shared.

Knowing that I was unable to “write out of someone else’s big dark place” (Lamott, 1994, p. 186), I invited participants to take part in validating or amending my interpretations, “whether that is checking interview transcripts or commenting on analyzed data” (Birt, et. al., 2016, p. 1806). Due to the time commitment, participants were given the choice in the degree to which they were involved in interpreting the data.
Disconfirming Evidence. To further validate this research study, I was sure to examine the disconfirming or, as described by Lub (2015) negative case selection (p. 5). Creswell and Miller (2000) define this process where the researcher must “establish the preliminary themes… and then search through the data for evidence that is consistent with or disconfirms these themes” (p. 127).

Unsurprisingly, this was one of the most challenging elements of data analysis for this study because I struggled to make sense of the need for finding disconfirming evidence when the confirming evidence was primarily answering the research questions. To strengthen the validation for the data of this narrative work, the “search for disconfirming evidence provides further support of the account’s credibility because reality, according to constructivists, is multiple and complex” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127).

Relational Ethics

As an insider for this study, I was not only responsible for determining the focus of the research, but also for navigating the relationships with participants (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 11). I needed to acknowledge. . .

. . . that a person’s lived and told stories are who they are, and who they are becoming, and that a person’s stories sustain them. This understanding shapes the necessity of negotiating research texts that respectfully represent participants’ lived and told stories. (Clandinin, 2013, p. 200)

Developing trust and building rapport with these storytellers frequently exposed my passions and prejudices for researching this topic (Norum, 2000, p. 320). Hendricks (2018) described the unequal power relationship that exists between teachers and students, but the same holds true between a researcher and the participant. Human connections would only be possible if these
teachers felt “safe around [me]” (p. 49). For me to develop relational trust with the three participants I needed to create a space that lessened their “sense of vulnerability” (Hendricks, 2018, p. 49).

**Human Connections.** When I met with each of the three participants, I was able to relate to each of them through “the experience of shared energy” (Hendricks, 2018, p. 145) in both music making and in conversation about our identities. As we got to know each other, I shared more of my experiences with each participant as it connected to their experiences. This was done for no other reason but to ensure the participants that I was not there as an agent with an agenda, seeing them only as an object, but rather as a peer relishing the connection with other trans music teachers. My personal self-expression facilitated a space where each participant was welcome to be “their own unique version of humanness”, provided a space where “their expressions of self…naturally emerge[d]” (Hendricks, 2018, p. 157).

Bochner (2017) articulated, “human beings are relational beings, and thus every story of the self is a story of relations with others” (p. 76). Through writing and rewriting my story, and ultimately the stories of the participants, I was encouraged to listen earnestly to what was being said, as well as what was left unsaid. Through meeting with each of these participants, our stories entwined and reminded me of the importance of human connection. Not having to explain our identities to each other helped us to develop relationships that were caring instead of used for rigorous research purposes, engaging with a human being instead of an object of study (Bochner, 2017, p. 71).

In addition to the importance of human connection was also the importance of being aware of my role as researcher. As Ellis (2017) described “relational ethics also include mindful self-reflection about the researcher’s role, motives, and feelings during the research process” (p.
437). As such, I provided myself with space after each interaction to reflect about my experiences in each context. I did this to ensure that my thoughts and feelings were validated but the experiences of Iroh, Michaela, and Lily were at the forefront.

**What’s in a Name?** As mandated by IRB guidelines, maintaining participants’ anonymity was a necessity and while each person agreed that the use of pseudonyms was important to preserve anonymity, both Iroh and Lily refused to adopt one, asserting that the act of changing their name again was problematic to their visibility as a transgender person. Following the suggestions of Lahman et al., (2002) I “closely involve[ed] TGNC [transgender, gender nonconforming] research participants in the research naming process…[because] using their chosen name is important or using a pseudonym of their own choice is a welcome opportunity” (p. 4).

Lahman et al. (2022) continued to express the ways in which the use of pseudonyms could inhibit visibility for the trans participant, as one of their study’s participants stated:

We learn to trust you, to open the door to our souls over time as rapport solidifies. Then suddenly you leave us, erase our names as if we don’t exist as individuals, as if we never had so existed. You abandon us, affix your name to our stories, and substitute in a pseudonym where our real name ought to be. Our stories abruptly become your stories (p. 4)

Michaela, however, used the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to select a name that was seemingly more ‘feminine’, but for Iroh and Lily it raised concerns that it seemed to disrespect their transitions. Lily explained via text message:
As the researcher, I had an ethical responsibility to ensure that each person remained anonymous, but I also had the same responsibility to allow participants the agency to remain visible by using their chosen names (Vincent, 2018, p. 102).

As a trans, non-binary person, I acknowledge my bias on this topic. I went through my own transition with my name and I understand the complexity in the choice to use a pseudonym. I have lived as Miranda for the last several decades and am only just coming to terms with how problematic that name is for my identity. Not only am I misgendered more frequently when Miranda is used, but it often causes dysphoria to hear such a feminine name attached to myself. Changing my name to M.R. is a less clear indication of which gender category another person might assume I belong. When I hear my name called or see it in a concert program, as M.R., I feel much more visible and as the purpose of this study is to facilitate trans music educators’ visibility, I felt it important to leave this decision in the hands of each participant.
Vincent (2018), a transgender scholar of sociology, generated conversations with study participants surrounding this same concern, recounting the ways in which participants negotiated their names and advocated for them to use their names if they wished.

This required careful consideration not only of risk of harm to participants, but to their friends and families who could be potentially affected without any part in the decision-making process. I justified this decision through respect for each participant’s autonomy, and ability to assess personal risk in context (through dialogue where desired) (p. 109)

The considerations taken in selecting pseudonyms placed the power to name in the hands of each of the participants. They were able to name or re-name themselves as they saw fit, mindful of “the risks (and benefits) of visibility on a case-by-case basis, in dialogue” with the researcher (Vincent, 2018, p. 108).

**Closing**

The field of narrative inquiry “makes audible the voices and stories of people marginalized or silenced in more conventional methods of inquiry” (Bowman, 2006, p. 14).

Through a narrative inquiry, informed by the tenets of critical storytelling, transgender music educators can provide readers a glimpse into their plight. As Bruner (2002) states, “Great narrative is an invitation to problem finding, not a lesson in problem solving. It is deeply about plight, about the road rather than about the inn to which it leads” (p. 20). In the three chapters that follow, Iroh, Michaela, and Lily speak of their plight, and bring to light the successes and struggles they encountered on their journey as a transgender music educator.
CHAPTER 4: SURVIVE, ARRIVE, THRIVE – IROH’S STORY

At 7:45am, the first hour jazz band students sluggishly put their instruments together. Monday mornings after a school trip and an extended weekend made for a bit of a challenge to get started. A few moments later, Iroh started rehearsal. “I promise you, the first time we play through this, it is going to sound like crap!” Iroh said to the students as they groaned at the new piece in front of them.

One student asked, “how far do we have to go?”

“As far as we can!” Iroh said, thumbing through the score. “Well, I’d like to at least make it to measure 15...” They gestured for students to ready their instruments and began leading them through the new piece of music.

Introduction

Ten days before my trip I received an email from the school principal saying that there would not be school on one of my observation dates because their annual Outdoor Learning Experience fell on the first date. I was concerned that Iroh, themself, had not contacted me about this and I was worried that they had forgotten about me. I finally connected with them the day before I was scheduled to leave, and we adjusted the timing of my visit to accommodate the school schedule. Excited, but wary, I left for my first research trip of this study.

Iroh

When I first spoke to Iroh on Zoom to make the plans for the trip, they joined the conversation from their back porch, a place they had transformed into a patio for their cats,

5 The principal had initiated a school-wide trip in hopes of facilitating an environment where students could connect with each other as well as their teachers. More information on this specific trip will be detailed in the Outdoor Learning Expedition section of this chapter.
known as the “catio”. Picatso, their black cat with white mittens, joined us. I knew it had only been a few weeks since Iroh’s top surgery and noted their multi-colored, crew neck shirt.

“You got that shirt on with no problem?!”

“I did! It looks great, doesn’t it?” Iroh gently massaged their incisions. Iroh spoke with a light, soprano timbre that only went higher the more animated they were. “I’m a little worried that I won’t be able to get out of it, but my clothes feel so much better these days!”

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The plane full of passengers rocked from side to side as we made our descent into the airport. I closed my eyes, clenched my fists and held my breath until I felt the wheels firm on the tarmac. I opened my eyes and looked out the window and saw a completely different landscape than the corn and soybean fields of Illinois. The Rocky Mountains rose up all around and as I walked outside, I noticed the outside air smelled different, cleaner perhaps.

Iroh mentioned that they would be performing in a concert with their community band and on the evening of my arrival, I decided to attend. I arrived at the venue just after the concert had started; the comfortable red theater chair squeaked as I sat down. The narrator was introducing the third song selection, a rousing Sousa march as I scanned the ensemble for a familiar face. I did not see anyone I recognized. I looked again at their Facebook profile to remind myself of their face. Was I in the wrong place?

I noticed that the “women” musicians of the ensemble wore red scarves so I looked over the music stands, behind the instruments, for someone not wearing a red scarf who might be Iroh. The march ended, the audience applauded, the band stood up, bowed, and left the stage for intermission. I still hadn’t found Iroh. I wondered again if I was in the wrong place, so I went through our text messages and found that I was in the correct location.
After intermission, the ensemble walked back onto the stage, and I saw a person that looked like Iroh but was wearing a black dress and a red scarf. Was I mistaken? This couldn’t be them. But it was. I jotted a note in my program about my assumption that they would be wearing the “male” attire. I was curious. Why did they wear a dress for this concert? When we had spoken on Zoom, they had made visible their trans identity, but in this space, not so much. At the concert’s conclusion, I left the theater with more questions than answers about their trans identity. Why did they mute their trans identity for this performance?

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**Mx. Iroh: Music.** Iroh’s school was situated in an old warehouse. I took in the pink morning sky, the mountain backdrop on my left, the noise of the highway on my right, and walked with Iroh into the building. We made awkward small talk as we walked down the carpeted hallway to the end of the hall and the door to their classroom. *Mx. Iroh, Music* was laminated on the wall. The signage alone pointed to their trans visibility in this school environment and showed that the school staff validated Mx. Iroh by offering to put their preferred honorific on the placard.

We walked into the dark room. Iroh walked past the light switch. “Do you want me to hit the lights?” I asked.

“No, I’ll get it.” Iroh walked to the other end of the long, rectangular classroom. I stood still, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness. “There!” they said as they turned on rope lights that bordered the classroom. “I don’t like the feeling of the room with the overhead lights on.” They fumbled over mountains of uncased instruments to turn on another small lamp.

The dim light created a nice ambiance in an otherwise messy environment. I glanced around the room. The walls were mostly bare and the shelves on each side of the room were
littered with unfiled sheet music. Choir risers stood in the middle of the room and separated the “band” area from the “everything else” area. A hot water kettle, coffee mugs, and other morning essentials were scattered on the shelf at the front of the choir side of the room while Iroh’s workspace sat at the front of the band half. Their desk, at least I think there was a desk under all that clutter, held a large desktop computer covered in sticky notes. An unused printer sat under a pile of papers below the whiteboard. I heard rustling papers behind me.

“Will this work?” Iroh asked as they cleared off a small table. “You mentioned you’d need a place to work.” They laughed awkwardly as they walked the table towards me.

“Yeah, that’ll be perfect, and I’ll just grab…” I looked around for something to sit on, but everything was covered with music, “…this stool.” Iroh, seemingly unbothered as I stacked the music on top of the broken printer, walked to the other end of the room to turn on the hot water kettle. I sat for a few minutes and watched them turn on their computer while mumbling to themself. I opened my own computer to begin taking notes for the day and shortly before 8am, the sound of energetic high school students could be heard in the hallways.

The first hour jazz band walked in. A handful of students stopped to say hi to me and Iroh, who some addressed as sir, which Iroh welcomed. The students assembled their instruments while Iroh grabbed their saxophone and sat down at the front of the class.

Quantum Learning Academy

Character, integrity, vision, and the arts are all part of the Quantum Learning Academy (QLA) teaching philosophy. This public charter school, with an arts-based focus, opened enrollment both for students in the area as well as international students, whose funding was provided by a third-party organization. The funding for QLA came from the state and was based upon the number of students enrolled. With small class sizes and the freedom to approach state-
based curriculum as teachers saw fit, the school had originally operated as an alternative school for students who had been expelled from their other schools.

But the current school administration had other ideas about how the school should function and who it should serve. That Monday morning, we stood in the dimly lit hallway and talked with the school principal, Rick. His muscular build and long hair pulled back into a ponytail, exuded both a gentle and strong persona. Rick explained that he wanted to do away with the alternative school model and insisted that QLA become a place where all students would learn how to interact with their peers and teachers in positive ways. As a student, Rick, himself, had been sent to an alternative school and he felt a personal stake in changing the environment of QLA. Instead of simply punishing a student, Rick thought it best to involve parents and, if necessary, counselors to help redirect student behavior and foster a positive environment for all who went to school at QLA.

I was struck by how the school seemed to intentionally cultivate a safe place for LGBTQ students, something that I had infrequently witnessed. I emailed Principal Rick to see if queer students were deliberately recruited to attend QLA. He answered my questions by stating that students, faculty, and staff all focus on the culture of the school by asking themselves two questions:

1. How do people feel in our school?
2. How do others feel as a result of being around me?

He credited the above questions with the creation of a safe and comfortable setting for all the students, but never directly mentioned the safety and comfort for all teachers.

Although not formally described as a “gender facilitative school”, QLA had many of the same qualities of a gender facilitative environment. The redirection of student behavior allowed
for a space where students were able to recognize that their words and actions have consequences (Luecke, 2018, p. 274). Principal Rick and the other teachers and staff at QLA provided support for “children of all genders by ensuring that they have an equal opportunity to learn in safe environments” (Luecke, 2018, p. 273). QLA provided “proactive climates that ensure safety, are sensitive and child-centered, and have structures in place that nurture gender identity skills and peer support” (Luecke, 2018, p. 273).

QLA was unlike any school environment that I experienced. In fact, it was the exact opposite of any of my previous teaching environments. While Iroh’s school context had provided a rich environment, validating their trans identity and facilitating a space where they were able to be visible as trans, it was not always as magical in their musical journey.

Before Mx. Iroh

During the conversation on Iroh’s cat-io when we talked by Zoom, they shared about their college experience. Before changing their major to music education to become a band teacher, Iroh had started their studies in biology at a liberal arts college.

“I went to college during the discrimination admin – I mean, the Trump administration,” they joked, “but I always felt much more comfortable in the college environment.” The college’s location meant that Iroh moved from living in a small town where their trans identity had to be hidden, to a bigger city where they met many other transpersons. “College was a lot nicer,” they recalled, “but it could be tense on campus at times because there were a lot of rural people who really identified with the Trump campaign and its message, but since the majority of students were anti-Trump, I still felt pretty safe.”

The Trump administration actively erased transgender provisions in recent amendments to Title IX legislation championed by the Obama administration and revoked much of President
Obama’s guidance for supporting transgender students in schooling (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2020). Remembering the tidal wave of anti-trans legislation that came out during Iroh’s time at college, I wondered if they felt safe outside the campus community. “What about when you weren’t on campus? How was it then?” I asked.

“I didn’t really advertise my queerness when I went out into the community.” Iroh began. They shifted in their chair, took a deep breath, and looked back at me. “I didn’t feel safe out there because the community was more agriculture, rural sort of thing, but at the school itself, I felt very safe. It was nice because my professors tried to get my name and pronouns right and the university let me change my name in the system so that it came up on the rosters as the name that I go by.”

It was interesting, though not surprising, that Iroh chose to hide their queerness in the community. What struck me was the university’s ability to provide Iroh with the agency to validate their trans identity through something as simple as changing their name, a practice that has become more commonplace in higher education (Goldberg et al., 2018).

“Were there ever times where you didn’t feel safe or seen on campus?”

“Ya know…” Iroh shifted again in their chair. “I didn’t have any direct problems with anybody until my senior year, right before student teaching.” Agitated, Iroh crisscrossed their legs in the chair, and continued, “There was this grad student from the south…I already felt the need to be defensive around him and I really wasn’t wanting to find out if he was raised to think trans and queer people were ‘wrong’. But at one point we had to do something together and he started asking *really* personal questions about my trans identity.” They raised a finger to their lips, as if to stop someone from talking and turned to face an imaginary person. “‘I don’t want to talk about this with you. I don’t know you and I don’t feel comfortable having this conversation.’
That conversation ended, but the next time we worked together he told me that he looked up my dead name!”

Iroh stood up.

Visibly angry, they went on, “…and then used my dead name and was like, ‘There, now doesn’t that feel better, more normal?!’ It was a horrible, uncomfy time! I told the band directors that it happened, and they were like, ‘We’ll talk to him’ and he avoided me from there on out.”

After a beat, they pulled out their chair and continued. “My friends all wanted me to have filed Title IX against him, but I was super poor and exhausted and I was already taking 21 credit hours … I wasn’t looking to add anything legal to my workload. But for him to be like, ‘There, doesn’t that feel better?’ No! No it doesn’t! It might feel better for you because you have stuff to work on…” They sighed. “Can we move on?” They sat down. I changed to another topic.

“There, now doesn’t that feel better?” The Southern grad student said. I couldn’t get past that statement. This grad student had used Iroh’s visible transgender identity as an opportunity to invalidate their identity.

**First Job: Homeschool Academy**

On our first day together at QLA, Iroh talked about their first teaching job, a position located in a military community. They taught music for grades K-12 at a homeschool academy. Iroh saw the elementary music students for the first three days of the week, the middle school students on Thursday, and high school students on Friday.

“My first job was not nice. My coworkers weren’t nice and some of the students also weren’t. At the academy the students had music, and art, and science labs…” Iroh trailed off as QLA students barged into the classroom. Clearly confused, Iroh looked at me, “Wow, what were we talking about? It completely left my brain.”
We sat in silence.

After a moment, Iroh continued. “I’m easily distractible. I just always have brain fog, and it gets worse when I’m hungry and…” They paused, stared off in the distance, and appeared to remember their train of thought. “Oh yeah, we also had a technology class. It worked okay.”

“Minus the homophobia and transphobia?” I asked.

Confused again. They asked, “What? Oh, yeah, minus the mean people.” They stood up and walked towards the other side of the classroom. “They knew!” Iroh turned back to face me. “They knew when they hired me, and I was so confused, because the person who had the biggest problem with me was the principal and she was the person who hired me!” Iroh sat on the top choir riser. “She hated me! I think it’s because the English teacher hated me and those two were friends.”

“Why did the two of them hate you?” I asked.

“Because of my identity. Literally just because I was trans.” Iroh jumped off the riser. “The English teacher would find any excuse she could to try to get me in trouble with the principal.” Iroh paced. “During recess duty, some of the kids would ask me to play 4-square with them, so I would, and she’d go to the principal and say, ‘Oh Mx. Iroh does not supervise the kids and is always out there just playing and not actually doing their job.’”

“Well at least she used the right pronouns?”

“No!” Iroh stopped. “She did NOT! I just try not to misgender myself in other people’s favor!” Iroh laughed and walked behind the piano as the choir students walked inside.

In the homeschool environment, Iroh’s trans identity was again visible, but invalidated by the “two of them”, the principal and the English teacher. They vulnerably went into that teaching
scenario, open with their identity from the beginning but unable to actually be true to themself because of the invalidation of their trans identity.

**Advanced Choir at QLA with Mx. Iroh**

The advanced choir students walked on to the risers. I recognized some students who had been in the jazz band earlier that day. “This is a school of many performers…” Iroh spoke to me as they sat down at the piano. “This is my second year at this school, and it has been a time! The previous teacher was an excellent musician but struggled to make connections with students.” Iroh played a major triad to get students’ attention. There was a brief hush. But then Iroh began to play, badly. Both Iroh and the students cracked up. Iroh laid their head on the keys, stayed for a moment, and then looked up. “This is what happens when your piano professor in college pity-passes you because you’re ‘just going to teach band’ Wow!” Several students laughed but others appeared unamused. Once the laughter quieted, Iroh asked me to introduce myself to the group. I observed four other classes but there was something about this class that made Iroh feel comfortable to ask me to introduce myself.

I stood up. “Hi friends! I’m M.R. Mx. Iroh invited me because they know that I’m interested in sharing the experiences of trans teachers in their music classrooms.” Before I could say anything else, Iroh was on their feet in a power stance.

“That’s ME!” they said proudly.

They had yet to teach anything musical and already my presence had provided Iroh with visibility and validation.

The students applauded and Iroh started rehearsal.

When the rehearsal ended, Iroh and I chatted about their relationship with this group of students. Compared to the previous four classes, Iroh appeared to be the most comfortable in
front of this class. When they introduced me, they had unapologetically connected my presence in the classroom to their identity as a transgender music teacher. I asked, “You mentioned earlier, before badly playing the piano, [we laughed] that the previous music teacher struggled to connect with the students. That doesn’t seem to be lacking with you. Why do you think that is?”

“I mostly just assumed that they’d like me,” they said smiling, “even if I am extremely bad at piano.” Iroh heard a commotion in the hallway and looked out the door. It was only a student opening their locker, but it was enough to distract them. “What were we talking about? Oh, the previous teacher.” Iroh came back into the classroom. “Even if it wasn’t true that the students liked me, I just pretended like it was. And eventually, it was true!” They laughed again and logged into their computer to update attendance from the previous three class periods. “I think they like me because I speak my intentions a lot and so the kids know that I have plans. I’m very open in both the things that I’m confident in AND the things that I struggle with, so they know that piano is not my strong suit, and they know that band is my strength…” They paused to look at a student standing in the doorway, “…and they know that in them I’m also going to look for their strengths…strengths like getting the highest percentage on the music theory quiz that everyone took…Congratulations!” they addressed the student.

“Me?” The student asked, shocked. Iroh nodded. “Then I guess I don’t need help with the modes. I’ll see you later!” The student turned and walked away. Iroh laughed. I took it that this student had been a frequent visitor during planning periods.

“They just remind me so much of me when I was their age.” Iroh said with a sigh. “It’s fun to see yourself in students and think, ‘I wonder what I would have been like in high school if I knew about my identity back then.’ Anyway…” Iroh checked the time. It was lunch time. “I’m
hungry! Wanna go get lunch?” Thinking they were never going to ask, I agreed, and we walked to their car and headed to a chicken shack down the street.

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Iroh had experienced both dysphoric and euphoric visibility in each of the previously mentioned school environments. Dysphoric visibility accompanied Iroh through their days in college where their grad student colleague used their deadname on purpose and followed them to the homeschool academy by being misgendered daily. I had only been at QLA for half a day and already it was clear that they experienced euphoric visibility daily which assisted in validating their identity as a transgender music teacher.

**Outdoor Learning Expedition (OLE)**

The students and faculty at Quantum Learning Academy participated in OLE, their outdoor learning expedition, the week prior to my arrival. Having never participated in such an event, I wanted to know more about it and why it seemed to be a very significant part of the culture of this school. “Remember Rick from this morning?” Iroh asked. I nodded. “Well, he wanted this trip to take place in an environment unfamiliar to everyone with the purpose of building community.”

Outdoor educational activities are not only used to get students out of the classroom, but these experiences also provide the opportunity for power dynamics to be altered from the traditional teacher-student dichotomy present in the school setting (Schmidt & Bobilya, 2022, p. 84). “It really just gets everyone on the same level and we’re doing stuff that is unfamiliar to all of us.” Iroh continued. “The idea is that a lot of people will step outside of their shell in a way that they won’t inside the school environment.” They paused to eat.
Iroh noted that through OLE, many of the non-verbal students excelled. “Every year that I’ve been going, one of our non-verbal students starts talking to people which has been really cool to witness. In the last choir, you might have noticed that there was one student back here,” they gestured from where we were seated at the front of the band half of the room, “and they’re one of those students.” Iroh rose to stand in the space where the student stands for choir. “And they DO sing, but they just do it very gently and they’re too scared to do it around people yet. So that’s why I let them be back there.” Iroh walked over to the choir risers across the room. “I know that they’re practicing the part, just very gently and in the past when we do the individual tests, we have to sit on opposite sides of the room, and I face the other way and I sing with them.” They said as they turned their back to me.

“That’s amazing! What is it that makes this student so comfortable to sing in your presence?” I asked.

“I’m honestly not sure, but I like to think that it’s because they see me make all kinds of mistakes and know that it’s okay to make mistakes.” Iroh began. “There’s less pressure and I know they’re learning the part.”

I continued, “Earlier you said something about this trip being the moment when your students start to realize that their teachers are people. Does that mean teachers are also coming out of their shells at these events?”

“Yeah!” They said as they walked towards me. “There’s just more room for casual interaction and less about just our class stuff.” They sat down. “It’s nice having an environment where we can just be people and not teachers.” The casual interaction that took place between teachers and students made visible the fact that teachers were people. Though not specific to transgender teachers, this connects to Iroh’s ability to feel seen.
Iroh stood again, this time to move music stands back from their podium at the front of the band side. “In the evenings, the teachers do presentations during a big assembly and there’s time for stories in your group of teachers. My group performed the second night and we each talked about our high school experiences and our theme for the evening was ‘survival in high school versus arrival in high school (just being there) and thriving in high school’ – so survive, arrive, thrive.” They paused and took a deep breath. “Each teacher talked about whether they did one of those things.” They paused again. “It was nice to get to share our stories…”

**Survive, Arrive, Thrive.** At this point during our lunch break, students started to come into the classroom. Iroh welcomed them. “Just so you all know, this is still our lunch. So while you’re welcome to come in, we are going to continue our conversation.” The students understood and respected this boundary and took a seat not far away from us. I asked if Iroh felt comfortable sharing these things in front of their students and they replied, “Well, they’ve heard it already so, yeah, I can tell you. They’re not listening anyway.”

Iroh continued their story. “I gave them the PG-13 version of my life. I started out with how we were super poor and lived in a motel when I was in high school and that the community was super homophobic and transphobic, and I just had to deal with it…” They trailed off as a student began to play loudly on the keyboard. Iroh raised their voice. “I guess you could say then that I was on survive mode in high school.” They stood up and checked on the student.

“Listen, sir!” The student behind the piano shouted. “I think I figured it out!” The student smiled while they played a melody in a minor key with chordal accompaniment.

Iroh stared at the student. “And why is it that you are no longer in any of my ensembles, friend?”

The student stopped and stared at Iroh. “You know why, sir.”
Iroh crossed their arms. “We should talk…don’t you have somewhere to be?” The student and Iroh locked eyes, and then the student left the classroom.

**Gender Support at QLA**

“This school is such a queer school.” Iroh said as they walked to the trash can. “One time I was sitting down with one of the choir classes and I was having everybody tell me their name, and pronouns if they wanted to, and just like a fun fact about them and 75% of the class…” They motioned to the students in the hallway. “…it was a small handful of kids that were cis/het…it was a revealing moment for sure.”

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It was not until Iroh’s junior year of high school that they began experimenting with orientation and gender identity markers. “We never really told the teachers when I was in high school, but sitting with these kids, I’m realizing that these students feel much more seen when they are able to share who they are with me.” Iroh continued, “And we have this gender support plan and when I found it, I was like, ‘Hey guys, what if we used this thing?’ We use it now. It has been very helpful for us to know what our students’ preferred name is and pronouns and things. There are about nineteen people on it, but I think we could easily put thirty students on this thing.” Since they didn’t have a copy of the actual document, they shared a screenshot of the categories, omitting student identifiers.

![Figure 4 Google Doc headings used by QLA Teachers](image)

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6 The use of gender support plans or gender communication plans are the most recent tool being used to support trans students. Baum (2022) found that assisting mental health care providers in supporting transgender students in schools was beneficial using these gender support plans. The use of these communication tools maximized “conditions for a successful experience at school for these students” (abstract).
After seeing the screenshot, I wondered why the “bio gender” column was necessary. The only response to my query was a shrug of the shoulders from Iroh and the conversation continued. Iroh mentioned that not all students are allowed to be on the plan. In fact, before being put on the gender support plan, parents are required to sign a waiver (see below; full doc in Appendix K).

The waiver grants permission for teachers to honor the trans identity of a student. It was developed by faculty and staff at QLA and approved by the District’s Director of Civil Rights.

I asked Principal Rick, via email, if he could share any further information about the gender support document. He responded:

One of our axioms that we live by is, ‘No one should ever feel bad for who they are.’ We constantly review our practices to ensure we are meeting the needs of our community. Interestingly, one of our staff mentioned on our staff survey that we will spend an hour or more ensuring we are all ‘good people’ and then rush through other items that may seem
more pressing. I took this as a compliment, knowing that our culture is what will provide the students with what they need to thrive.

Rick closed his email by quoting feminist and social justice advocate L.R. Knost:

*It’s not our job to toughen our children up to face a cruel and heartless world. It’s our job to raise children who will make the world a little less cruel and heartless.*

Although QLA’s gender support plan was a well-intentioned tool to assist trans student safety at school, it did not work for every student. The fact that some trans students were allowed to be honored as their preferred name/pronouns at school, others did not have the permission of their parent/guardian to experience validation of their trans identity.

Iroh and other members of the faculty did what they could to facilitate identity safe classrooms, which Cohn-Vargas and Steele (2015) define as classrooms promoting “student-centered teaching…using diversity as a resource for learning…developing strong relationships of trust with students …creating caring classroom environments” (para 7).

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“Remember that student from earlier? The one that called me sir…” Iroh asked.

I laughed. “Which one?”

“That’s true, a couple of them have called me sir today.” Iroh laughed. “The student who interrupted us earlier, playing the piano?”

I nodded.

“Well, I know for a fact that they are trans because they have told me, but their parents will not sign a waiver, so we can’t use the gender support plan for this student. The plan might be helpful, but it is also causing a huge divide between the trans students because we can’t honor
them all.” In the current educational climate for transgender students, many feel safer to socially transition at school than at home (Baker, 2023). Although QLA seemed to be a haven for most LGBTQ+ students, some were left without that validation.

“What do you do in those situations?” I asked.

“We end up just using last names for students whose parents will not sign the waiver. That’s why that student left my ensembles, I think. That and their parents want them to do something more substantial with their life than music.” I scratched my head at the thought that music is somehow an invalid thing to do with one’s life and Iroh continued.

“I think a good part of what has made me feel super solid in my identity has been my ability to be like, ‘Hey, ya know, I know exactly how that feels and it sucks!’ And being able to be an elder for these queer youth is a big part of my authenticity. It’s like by helping them grow I see myself growing.”

Iroh felt that their ability to make visible their transgender identity, somehow validated that identity and the gender identity of their students, even those who were not allowed to be on the gender support plan. They turned and welcomed the orchestra students inside. Several familiar faces entered the room and grabbed their instruments to begin orchestra rehearsal.

**Orchestra Rehearsal**

There was a lot of student chatter during this last class period of the day. “You all just keep scooting closer to me!” Iroh said as they motioned for the students to push their chairs further back on the rug.

“It’s just because we love you so much!” One student said.

“Lots of love and emotions today.” Iroh chuckled. “Can we just play music? I’ll give you five minutes to look over what you need to look over and then we’ll begin.” The students
focused for all of a minute until Iroh noticed the commotion and tapped on their music stand with a pencil. “I guess you’re ready…Let’s start at measure 13…” Iroh said. After playing for a couple of measures, the students set down their bows and talked with their neighbor – a pattern that continued for the duration of the class period. Each time that students began talking, Iroh sat silently, waiting for them to be ready again, at which point, they would stand, ready to conduct.

The last bell of the day rang. The students sat silently.

Iroh sat down. “Did this rehearsal feel productive to you today?” The students bowed their heads. “Don’t start packing up,” Iroh instructed, “When I stop you, that’s not an invitation to continue or to talk. Just stop. Okay?” They continued, disappointment in their eyes, “Okay, we’ll do better tomorrow. Have a nice night.”

The students slowly packed their things, walked out of the classroom. It was interesting to witness Iroh both having the authority of a teacher and doing their best to stifle the discouragement that they must have been feeling. With a big sigh Iroh stood and stretched, “they really are a good group. I just wish they had been more focused today...”

My first day in the classroom with Iroh had come to an end.

**Practicalities of Teaching Music**

There are many elements specific to music teaching that classroom teachers do not experience. Music teachers must consider the repertoire that they select, the attire that they, and by extension their students, wear for concerts, and consider their rehearsal language. For concerts, Iroh wears their black suit and a teal shirt and instead of labeling attire options as male/female, Iroh provides two options: Option 1 consisted of the QLA teal polo, black pants, black dress shoes, black socks. Option 2 was the QLA teal polo, black skirt, black dress shoes, and black socks/tights/hose. Iroh shared,
So I just say, instead of saying boys option and girls options, I just say here are the two options and you can choose whichever one you want. And I always get some AMAB kid who’s like, ‘so you’re saying that I could wear a skirt?!’ and I’m like, ‘literally, I don’t care. If it’s on the list of options, it is up to you.’ And I’m still waiting for the day when one of them actually does it. Last semester the kids talked about getting a skirt for this one very cis-het guy and he was going to do it if they got him one, but they didn’t bring him one because they all have ADHD.

Although Iroh didn’t specifically call these options boy/girl, male/female, the two options were still obviously binary.

Repertoire selection is another activity specific to the music teacher. Iroh takes great consideration in programming music from queer artists who vocally support the LGBTQ+ community; arrangements by the a cappella group, Pentatonix comes to my mind. The students loved singing the Pentatonix cover of White Winter Hymnal, so much that they would often continue singing it as they left rehearsal.

**Unsettledness**

The day before, after the Sunday afternoon community band concert, I waited afterwards to see if I could meet Iroh in person. For some reason, the band did not leave the stage as the audience filed out until I was the only person left in the auditorium. Without drawing too much attention, I walked out of the auditorium and into the warm and windy outdoors. I spent much of the night, and all of Monday puzzling over how and when to ask Iroh about their choice to wear the “women’s” concert attire, but never found the right moment. But later, at dinner on Monday

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7 Assigned Male at Birth
8 Mitch Grassi and Scott Hoying are both openly gay and share their personal lives on their Instagram pages.
night, as we sat on their cat-io it was Jacob, Iroh’s fiancé, who brought up the topic of Iroh’s choice of performance clothing.

“I have actually been wanting to ask you about that all day!” I began. “But I didn’t know how to bring it up. Thanks for mentioning it, Jacob! Was that a conscious decision, to wear the dress?”

Although Jacob brought it up, both he and Iroh shifted in their chairs. Iroh took a deep breath and responded. “I think if I felt comfy and safe to try to educate this particular group of people, I likely would have worn something different.” They turned to Jacob, who reached out for Iroh’s hand.

“Yeah…” Jacob began, searching for words to continue the conversation. “When you came out for the concert I remember asking, ‘Are you comfy?’”

“Yeah, it was okay, I guess.” Iroh continued. “And…” They paused and took a deep breath. “There are a lot of folks in this group that have known me my whole life and they have no idea that I’m trans. They’re a very transphobic community, so I camouflaged for this performance. I only wonder what this group will do when I start taking T\(^9\) in the coming months.”

With his hand on Iroh’s lap and a smile on his face, Jacob said, “I think it’ll be easier than we think since it’ll be a more gradual change instead of you leaving for a year and coming back and people would be like, ‘What?’…”

Iroh sighed. “Yeah, I guess we’ll see.” We all sat in silence for a beat.

“I bet it will be tough.” I began. “But I’m glad to know that you have such amazing sources of support.” I nodded my approval to Jacob as we walked inside with our dishes. “I

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\(^9\) Iroh was going to begin taking testosterone in the coming months. For many trans masculine persons, beginning hormones is essential to reducing their feelings of dysphoria.
should probably be going but thank you both so much for the meal and the conversation.” I picked up my shoes, slipped them on and shook Jacob’s hand. “Jacob, it was incredible to meet you.”

“I was so glad when Iroh told me about this study,” Jacob beamed. “I think it has been really great for them to know you. So, thank YOU!”

“He’s right!” Iroh said. “I think this is the healthiest that I have felt in a long time, both emotionally and mentally. I feel like a good healthy mix is going on right now.” We laughed and I headed out the front door.

**Back in the Classroom**

Early on Tuesday morning, I left as the sun was beginning to rise. I rolled down the car windows and drove towards pink-tinted mountains to grab some coffee and, since the school didn’t have a cafeteria, something for lunch. I met Iroh in the parking lot just before 7:15 AM. “I brought leftovers from dinner last night! Be jealous,” they said as we walked inside. I was jealous.

We weren’t in the classroom for more than five minutes before students joined us. “I’m going to grab some hot water for my tea. Be right back!” Iroh said, leaving me in the room with a couple of students who were setting up the drum set.

“Where’d Mx. Iroh go?!” one boy asked.

“Oh she went…” The other student started to answer but stopped. “Damn, what?! I mean, they. They went to go get hot water.” The boys looked at me and then continued to set up the set.

I sat there, but stealthily listened in as the boys talked over how they had misgendered Iroh. The student who made the mistake seemed frustrated with himself, but the other student reassured him it was okay because he had fixed it. “Mx. Iroh would respect the hell outta that!
It’s all good, man.” Iroh returned and the boys shifted their conversation to tell Iroh how much they had been practicing last night and that they were ready for jazz band tomorrow morning.

Interactions like this would not be relevant in a cisgender music teacher’s classroom. Students wouldn’t need to catch their pronoun-slips in a space where their teachers’ gender pronoun was implicit. But in this classroom, the students were aware that in order for Mx. Iroh’s trans identity to be validated, they needed to honor their pronouns as they would any of their other teachers.

Iroh walked towards the choir side of the classroom to get ready for guitar class. All the while, shooing senior boys out of the room – “My god! Go to class.” They said with a smile. “Okay, guitar class.” They sighed. “Here we go.”

**Guitar Classes.** “I used to hate this class a lot more when I first started teaching it.” Iroh placed their toaster pastry down on the piano bench and reached for their tea. “I used to be like, ‘Yeah! I want to teach guitar LEGENDS!’” they shouted with their hands raised. “But then I remembered that my experience was far too minimal for that, so I was like, ‘Maybe people just wanna learn some chords?!’” Iroh lowered their arms.

The students came in, ready to practice for their playing tests. They worked on *Ode to Joy* as Iroh walked around to see how folks were doing.

“Sir? I need another copy of this piece.” One student said.

Without missing a beat, Iroh turned to that student, music in hand and said, “This piece?” The student nodded. “It’s all yours. Okay folks, let’s tune our guitars!” After students had tuned their guitars, they were instructed that today was a workday. “If you have any questions, I’ll be around. But today is for you to practice and remember, if you don’t like the score that you get the
first time, you can always try again.” The students went to work. Occasionally, a small celebration would be heard from the small groups of students. “I love this school.” Iroh smiled.

In the far corner a group of three students worked together. One student commented to her peers, “You know, in helping you guys, I’m learning it better, too.”

Iroh picked up on the comment and walked over. “I remember, before, you were like, ‘No, don’t make me’ and you’d get all nervous. But now, you’re relaxed, and you sound great. Nice job!”

**Planning Period.** After two guitar classes and a music theory class Iroh and I talked about the morning. “I love watching the way you interact with students.” I began as we sat down to talk in the band half of the classroom. “You mentioned yesterday that the previous teacher had trouble connecting with these kids, but you don’t seem to be having that problem. Why do you think that is?” I knew that I had asked that question yesterday, but I hoped Iroh might have more to say.

Iroh sat back in their chair, clutched their freshly poured glass of tea, and mused aloud, “I think I really see them, or at least I try to see them as very complex. I remind myself that I don’t know anything about their lives outside of school and so I just try to leave space for what I don’t know.” They stood up. “The school is small enough that when there are problems, all the teachers are made aware, and we all work together to try to help the students in a way that makes sense for them. I sort of think of myself as a chameleon, changing to fit the needs of my students,” Iroh chuckled, “but really, I’m less of a chameleon and more of a little monk guy. I even think about shaving my head sometimes. Anyway, I’m paid just enough to have clothes and lodging, but the value in my life is the fulfillment I get from working with these kids. We may not always be the best musicians and I know my limits, but we have a good time together.”
Iroh had summed up my feelings about teaching in those last two sentences. Teachers, music or otherwise, would likely agree that the fulfillment of teaching is not in the money, it is in working with students. As a music teacher, Iroh knew what they were capable of musically and they encouraged their students to challenge their own musical abilities each day.

“I love that about this place.” I replied.

“It is a magical unicorn of a place, isn’t it?” Iroh agreed.

A few moments passed as I considered Iroh’s answer about ‘seeing’ their students. I sensed a connection to the study’s research questions and asked, “Do you think since you see them that they also see you? Not even just as a trans person, but as a person?”

“I think both,” Iroh began, “One of the things that I think is most important about my work is simply that I am out and visible as a trans adult that they know. And at this arts-focused school, I get to be that visible trans person AND connect with my students while I teach music.” They laughed and continued. “I have good and bad things about me, and they can see me three dimensionally and hopefully that can kind of erase whatever stereotypes they have about trans people.” Iroh sat back down. “I have students where they’ve gone from ‘I don’t really know how to interact with you.’ to like ‘Oh that’s just Mx. Iroh and it’s wild in here.’” They laughed again. “I feel like by interacting with a trans adult, the students are starting to realize, ‘Oh, this is just a person.’” They smiled. “And a lot is going to change when I start taking T because now people are like, ‘Mx. Iroh, yeah that’s an AFAB10 person,’ but it might not be like that in a couple of years, or even sooner.”

Iroh walked over to the piano. “I know yesterday you asked me about feeling dysphoria when I’m singing with the sopranos,” they started to softly hum in their upper register, “and I

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10 Assigned Female at Birth
spent the night thinking about it. Before top surgery it didn’t really cause as much dysphoria but after top surgery—it’s weird.”

“Wow, I felt the same way!” I exclaimed, amazed to find we had this experience in common. “Keep talking!”

Iroh opened their arms as if to hug someone. “I feel so much more open when I sing and that makes me feel euphoric, but when I see myself in the mirror, it’s more dysphoric.” They sat back down on the piano bench. “I know that I am starting to see myself more and more in the mirror and when I talk, I know that I am being perceived as a woman because of my voice. I can’t hide that part of me.” They started to play through the music for choir. “But when I’m teaching, when I have to sing for the students, I don’t really think about it. I just do the thing. The students know that I’m not a soprano. I’m an alto.” Iroh stared off. “It’s like I’m almost able to dissociate and only see myself as the music teacher and not the trans music teacher in those moments.” Iroh looked up.

“I hear you.” I commiserated.

Iroh sighed and put their hands back on the keyboard. “Perhaps that’s not super healthy, but it’s where I am.”

Although Iroh mostly felt that their trans identity brought a positive sense of visibility, there were negative elements as well. The conversation surrounding the topic of being perceived as a woman, simply through their talking voice, was something that seems obvious now, but at the start of this project, I equated voice to mean singing voice. I knew that their advanced choir kids were about to walk through the door, so I sat with those thoughts for a while longer as they came inside.
5th Hour Choir. The bell signaled the end of 4th period as the advanced choir kids made their way into the room. “I think that this group knows me the best. They see me every day.” The students grumbled and rolled their eyes at Iroh’s comment. “Whether they like it or not.” Iroh laughed. “They see my best days and my bad days, and I feel like this group ends up garnering the best respect for me as a musician. I might not have solutions for all of the problems that they have but I know who to ask and I think that they respect that too. I don’t try to pretend to have answers to things, isn’t that right, folks?” Iroh asked the class. Some of the students offered sarcastic remarks about how Iroh never made mistakes while others simply nodded in approval.

“Alright folks, it’s sectionals today.” Iroh shouted over student talking as the bell sounded. “Sopranos you’re with me. Alto people, you’re all pretty leadership-y so you can go work over there.” They pointed towards the band side of the classroom. “Tenors go with Mac to the practice room and bass people, pull out the other keyboard and stay in this room with me so I know you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing. Ready?” Iroh dismissed the students to their practice spots and sat behind the piano.

“Which piece are we struggling with the most?” Iroh asked the sluggish sopranos. The students didn’t respond right away. A moment later one soprano suggested they begin with Ave Maria. “Alright! I guess that means we start with the hardest one first today.” The sopranos groaned as the basses warmed up behind them. Iroh began to sing higher than they had sung in yesterday’s rehearsal.

“Dang, Mx. Iroh can sing high notes?!?” One soprano shouted. “Let’s goooo!”

Iroh snapped their fingers and said, “I’m ready! I’ve been drinking tea today!”

“Dang! Let’s go brutha.” A bass added from behind the sopranos.
Everyone laughed. “Okay, okay. Let’s get back to work. Turn back around to your bass people” Iroh said. “Okay sopranos, where should we start?”

“The eggs benedict part?” One soprano sheepishly responded.

“Oh yes, I love a good eggs benedict in an Ave Maria…” Iroh chuckled as students rolled their eyes. “You know I’m funny!”

Twenty minutes went by. The bottom three voice parts could be heard singing through the same piece, *White Winter Hymnal*\(^{11}\). Iroh asked the sopranos if they should join in singing through that song. The sopranos agreed and suddenly, section by section, all the students had encircled the piano. By the final cadence, Iroh sat motionless behind the piano. The students stood waiting for a response. Iroh looked at the students in the circle and one broke the silence, first in a whisper with a quick crescendo, “that was BADASS!” The class erupted with celebration. Iroh remained quiet behind the piano.

“This group is capable of so much…” Iroh began, their voice shaking.

An excited tenor shouted, “Is he going to cry? Did we make him cry?” Every students’ eyes were glued to Mx. Iroh. The binary, male pronouns were frequently used by this excited tenor – even in his mocking tone, he was validating Iroh’s trans identity. He could have easily used the pronoun “they,” but this particular student, along with the other handful who addressed Iroh as sir, more often than not, elected to use he/him when referring to Iroh.

“Ya know, there was this small tear starting to form…” Iroh traced an imaginary tear down their cheek. “…but you know what would cause that tear to form completely? If you followed THE DYNAMICS!”

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\(^{11}\) This piece is frequently covered by the a cappella group, Pentatonix. [https://youtu.be/o10drRI3VQ0](https://youtu.be/o10drRI3VQ0)
The students’ laughter, like the sound of water boiling, belied their disbelief that they could possibly do any more than what they had just performed. Some feigned disgust as they shifted their weight, laughed, and smiled at Iroh.

“You’re capable of so much.” Iroh reminded them. “I see you. I see the hard work that you’re doing. I want you to turn to the people around you and thank them for singing with you.” The students turned to each other and smiled. “Now get out of here!” Iroh pointed to the doorway, gathered their music, and walked back to their desk. There was a vulnerability in the air and it hung on every note that the students were still singing in the hallway.

**Settling into Identity**

A couple of months after I had returned from my observation visit, I asked Iroh again about the phrase “settling into identity” through Facebook messenger. Almost immediately, they responded and equated the expression with the experience of building a character to race in the video game Mario Kart on Nintendo Switch:

I think that finding an identity that fit was like finally finding that perfect Mario Kart build. I tried Toad because he’s supposed to be fast – but I struggled to race him because he wasn’t compatible with the way I drive. I tried Bowser because the forums said he was the fastest – but then I found that there were other issues. Finally, almost by complete happenstance, I stumbled across a Yoshi build that I’m unbeatable with. I think that’s kind of what it feels like. I feel like I’m finally drifting right. I’m able to make the turns comfortably and have fun kickin’ a little ass. I’m still waiting to start HRT and it’s been an annoyingly long process…but I’m excited because right now, I feel right.

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**We’re Just People Doing People-y Things**

On a spring-like day in February, Iroh and I met again over Zoom. We talked about many things, but one thing was certain for Iroh, they were grateful to be part of this study. “This project and other projects like these are so important because right now in this country…” Iroh paused to catch a breath. “…we have trans-people under fire! Just this morning I saw a map of states that are trying to pass bills targeting trans people.”

We paused our conversation while Iroh shared their screen to show me the map\(^{12}\). “Some of these bills even go so far as to make it illegal to appear gender non-conforming in public! And it’s important to have stories of people in their classrooms – people who are trans – that are not doing anything…” They paused for a moment, trying to organize their thoughts. “They’re not doing anything…” another long pause. “…surprising…I guess.”

We both sat in silence. It was as if we both knew the words that Iroh was trying to avoid which would only further exemplify negative images of trans people in the classroom. Later that day, they sent me a series of text messages along with a Facebook post that they made that connected to transness in school environments.

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\(^{12}\) [https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights](https://www.aclu.org/legislative-attacks-on-lgbtq-rights)
The next day, Iroh and I met on Zoom again and they recalled a conversation that they had with their dad. “A couple months ago I was talking with my dad and he just doesn’t get it. He told me, ‘It’s okay for you to be trans and to be a teacher, but your students don’t need to know that about you.’” Iroh sat up a little straighter on the couch. “I sat there and explained to him, ‘Yes they do! My work as a trans teacher is not just important…it’s lifesaving…imagine never having a teacher that looks like you …imagine how alienating that would be for you…you would feel like you were wrong, like you didn’t belong. If you never saw an adult that looked like you then you would think that people like you never made it to adulthood.’”

Iroh sat back. “I had friends in high school that didn’t have that representation or parental support and they committed suicide. We don’t need more stories like that and since trans life spans are so short on average, I want to burn bright while I have the opportunity to.”

Iroh took a breath and continued. “We need stories where students get to see an adult who is successful and taking care of their mental and physical health AND trans…going out and being a performer…not scared to demand they are treated fairly…and my students see that in my classroom…” They rolled on, “Sure, I teach them music and that’s what we talk about in the
classroom. But they know that I’m trans. They’re starting to notice that I’m further in my transition because my voice is just starting to lower and I’m getting a lot of voice cracks when I sing now…and that makes such a huge difference…I feel like it’s just…it’s all so connected and so important and in addition to all that, they see how my coworkers treat me…they just treat me like another teacher.”

We both sat still for a moment.

I broke the silence. “Is there anything else that you want people to know?”

Iroh thought for quite some time. “I feel like…it’s just so important for me to teach kids how to make good music and I think that all beautiful music is made with meaningful community and anyone is capable of creating a meaningful community… that shouldn’t be restricted by gender identity or race or creed…or any of those other things that separate us into categories… anybody can make a meaningful space for music making and it’s important that kids have that representation in front of them through all of their different identities. So whoever reads your dissertation, I want them to read it and see that it is a big deal to have trans teachers and it’s a big deal because…” Iroh pointed at me. “You aren’t using us as objects. You are showing the reader that we are just people. We’re just people trying to do people-y things! It doesn’t have to be about political agendas… we can teach music AND be trans.”
CHAPTER 5: MASKS AND SILENCE – MICHAELA’S STORY

The fourth hour world music class had begun practicing polyrhythms from the previous day’s instruction. Michaela stopped the groove and students stopped playing a moment later.

“Why did I stop us?” she asked.

“Because we were off beat?” a student responded.

“Yeah, we were off beat...cuz we’re not listening!” Michaela grabbed her phone and pretended to scroll. “You cannot possibly hope to be counted as participating if you have your phone in one hand and an instrument in the other. So put the phones down and pay attention because I’ll be bringing your section in whenever I feel like it, so you better be ready.” She said as the reluctant students put their phones on the floor.

Introduction

In mid-October, I braved the clogged arteries of the Midwestern highways to travel to my first visit with Michaela, the second participant. I had texted before I left to let her know that I was on my way to her house, and she reminded me to grab an umbrella since we would be walking to school from there. Aside from having to go through background checks and volunteer training, (see Appendix D) I had had no other communication with any administrators from the school. Because I am a university student teaching supervisor, I had already been through volunteer screening for this district, which expedited the gatekeeping process. Armed with the proper documents to enter the school, I was excited to meet Michaela in person.

Jacob E. Spiro College and Career Academy

Jacob E. Spiro College and Career Academy (JESC) was an old building named after one of the city’s biggest influencers of the day, an investment banker and civic leader in the Jewish community. JESC, a four-year public, neighborhood high school is located on the northwest side
of the city with a beautiful view of the downtown skyline. Built in 1928, JESC is a large, brick building with a façade that creates an impressively intimidating feel. To attend JESC a student must live in the surrounding neighborhoods, but parents are not required to send their children to JESC. There are many options in the district like charter and magnet schools that require additional placement assessments. Although the occupancy of this school could host upwards of 2,000 students, JESC had a student population of less than six hundred, predominantly of Hispanic heritage. The school struggled with high truancy (72%) and a vast majority of its’ students came from low-income environments (81%) (School Details Page, n.d.).

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The layer of ice on my windshield that October morning was unexpected as I prepared to drive to Michaela’s house. She met me outside wearing heels, black flowy pants, and a silky sleeveless blouse. The mom in me wondered where her coat was; “It’s freezing out here!”, I thought to myself. She ran the temporary parking pass for her street out to me and stepped back inside to put on her winter coat. I placed the pass on my dashboard, grabbed my bags and locked the doors. With our lunches in one hand and coffees in the other, we walked, into the wind, the long three blocks to JESC. Once inside, we caught our breath and Michaela reminded me to have my ID ready. We went through a set of metal detectors and the security guard gruffly asked for my bag and ID while Michaela stopped by the school office.

We walked through several hallways to get to Michaela’s classroom. There was the occasional splash of color, but the whitewashed walls and the hum of the fluorescent lights felt oddly familiar. It was not until we arrived at the top of a winding staircase, and stepped out on the third floor, that I realized why I had strange feelings of déjà vu; the dull institutional color
and dim lighting reminded me of my time teaching at a prison earlier in my career (Abrahams, et al., 2012).

Three students greeted us. Per usual, they had arrived ahead of Michaela and were eating their breakfast at the top of the stairs. Mariana, the most vocal of the group, was joined by her significant other, a student who was openly trans at school but not at home, and a third student who seemed to be the strong, silent type. We said “hi” to the trio before we made our way to the second door on the left, across from the cafeteria, the location of the choral music room and piano lab.
The Classroom

As Michaela wrestled with her keys to unlock the door, the vague scent of today’s breakfast, artificial blueberry muffins, and that smell that only school cafeterias seem to have, wafted through my mask. Mariana and the others watched as Michaela struggled to finally unlock the door. “You so funny, Miss Girl!” Mariana said walking towards the classroom. Michaela forced a laugh and opened the door. The other students grabbed their breakfast, and everyone walked inside.

Figure 7 JESC Music Classroom

I walked around the room like a tourist struck by the astonishing sight of the city’s skyline. The room was split in half; one side equipped with electric keyboards and the other side arranged with old school desks whose arms pulled up into a tray for writing. I asked Michaela where I should sit. Sipping her coffee, she pointed towards the front row of piano benches. I went and found a spot.
“Dr. Michaela, you are so mean to our visitor!” Mariana said. “They’re sitting all the way over there?!”

I laughed and blurted, “Hey, I made this choice!”

Michaela laughed and backed me up. “Yeah, they made that choice!”

“Oh, so you’re saying she…” Mariana pointed to Michaela and held her nose. “She stinks?” She turned to face Michaela. “Girl, you stinky?”

I followed Michaela’s increased laughter as a cue that I could continue with the banter. “I didn’t say it.” I winked at Michaela.

“Oh, but you thought it.” Mariana heckled. The two other students kept their eyes glued to their phones while they finished eating breakfast.

Michaela grimaced and opened her computer. “Let me just open my gradebook…what have you been saying about me?” Mariana and her significant other laughed while Michaela and I looked at each other and smiled.

The bell rang.

Teaching at JESC

**First hour choir.** After witnessing the playful banter between Michaela and Mariana, I had high expectations for the way the rest of the day would go. At 7:45am, a small group of students trickled into the vestibule to grab their music. Michaela greeted them both in English and in Spanish as they walked into the classroom. Mariana and her trio of friends sat silently on their phones while other students sat lifeless in their desks. Michaela did her best to engage them. “Everybody stand up.” She said.

Nobody moved.
“Y’all, I need you to stand up!” She motioned with her hands to get them to stand. “Necesito que te levantes.” She repeated in Spanish. Michaela looked at me and shrugged her shoulders. She turned back to the students who were slowly getting to their feet. “We need to do a little bit of stretching. Why are we stretching?”

No response.

“Because singing is a…” She paused. The question lingered.

In unison with the same eye roll, a handful of students reluctantly uttered, “a full body sport.” It was clear that they were not interested in moving around at this hour. About fifteen minutes passed and four more students knocked on the door to be let into the classroom. The doors remained locked while class was in session.

Michaela did everything she could to encourage students to participate. I opened my research journal and pondered if Michaela’s visible trans identity was causing students to ignore direct instruction. Were students deliberately dismissing Michaela’s instructions or were they simply incapable of having a role in their education? As I journaled, Michaela continued to coax the students into singing.

“Alright, I’ve wasted a lot of time. Go ahead and have a seat and take out Carol of the Bells.” Michaela instructed. “Siéntate y…how do you say, ‘take out’ in Spanish, tu música.” She repeated. The students groaned as they sat down. “Okay, we’re going to go through this part by part starting with the baritones.”

Disappointed that it was not her turn to sing first, Mariana opined, “You never give your altos any attention or love.”

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13 Music by M. Leontovich, arranged by Peter J. Wilhousky, for four-part mixed voices, a cappella.
Unphased by this comment Michaela said, “Put a complaint in the complaint box,” she pointed to the door, “it’s that gray box over there. The one with the trash bag in it.”

Without missing a beat, Mariana replied. “Oh, I thought that was a picture of you!” This time there was no response from Michaela as she had already moved on to work with the baritones. After a few moments, Michaela looked towards Mariana and then at me, rolled her eyes and continued to sing for the baritones.

I noted that in the context of the choir rehearsal, it did not seem that Michaela’s identity, as transgender or as music teacher, was even relevant. Her students appeared to be so disconnected from their education that it would not have mattered who was in front of them. I watched as Michaela continued to work with the baritones.

“Wow!” Michaela said. “I’ve sung this song and this baritone part I don’t know how many times and for some reason I cannot sing it today.”

It seemed as if Mariana was the only other student interested in Michaela’s announcement. She looked up from her phone and in a shy tone she asked Michaela in a stage whisper, “Are you nervous?”

Michaela giggled. “I guess I am a little nervous.”

Mariana turned to me, as if to tattle. “You’re making her nervous.”

I blushed.

“You’re a ladies’ man.” Mariana joked with me. “I knew that about you. That’s what it is. That’s why she’s nervous.” Mariana sat back in her chair and disengaged until a school safety officer came into the classroom. She looked at the officer and then returned her focus to her phone.
The student safety officer walked up the few steps closest to the baritones. Without saying a word, the Gaston-like guard motioned to a student to stand up. “I really need him in this class.” Michaela said to the officer.

In a low, almost inaudible tone, the officer responded, “Well, I think he was having a conversation with another teacher and just walked out while the teacher was talking.” The officer gestured again for the student to stand up.

Michaela turned to the student with her hands on her hips. “Is that what happened?” The student looked at his feet and nodded. “Alright, well go take care of it but try to come back.” It was interesting to see this student’s physical response to Michaela’s question. His inability to make eye contact and to simply nod, led me to wonder if this was because he might have felt ashamed to admit that he had disrespected another teacher in front of Michaela.

After the student and the security officers left, Michaela stopped working with the baritones walked down a few steps and started to work with the altos. The altos sang through their part once before Michaela modeled for them in her register, an octave below the altos. The young students tried to sing in the same octave, confused because they couldn’t sing that low. “You know you need to sing it up here [sings in falsetto], right?” Michaela asked the students.

Mariana set her music down firmly. “Ugh, now she tells us!”

Michaela walked to the piano to play the part in the correct octave and had the altos sing with the piano. Suddenly she realized, “Oh my god, we forgot to do breathing exercises!”

In the same tone, Mariana mocked, “Oh my god, can we forget until tomorrow?” Michaela and I both laughed, and she turned her attention to the soprano section.
What seemed like two hours later, but was only fifty minutes, students crowded the entryway of the classroom. The university student teacher supervisor in me could not believe we had only worked on one piece the entire class period.

“Alright, y’all, don’t take off until that bell rings.” Michaela walked into the hallway. From the classroom I could hear her saying goodbye to the students in English and in Spanish.

**Practicalities of Teaching (Music) at JESC**

Michaela shared information about one concert that took place last school year. “We had a Black Lives Matter themed concert last fall where the kids were supposed to wear nice jeans and a t-shirt that had some kind of Black Lives Matter images or words on it. Not everyone had something like that though, so they just came in jeans and t-shirts mostly, but the intention was there. I wore jeans and the t-shirt that our school’s GSA had designed for Pride the summer before.”

For typical concerts, students had music department t-shirts and were asked to wear black pants, but again, if the student did not have black pants, they wore what they had. Michaela shared, “I always dressed up. Let me see, what did I wear to last year’s winter concert. Oh yuck,” she paused as she scrolled past a photo. “I wore a tie last year and a Santa hat. But the kids, as long as they’re there, I guess I don’t really care what they’re wearing.”

Repertoire selection for Michaela consisted of using music that was available to her in her classroom. She used many choral standards, such as *Carol of the Bells* and a traditional *Dona Nobis Pacem* canon. Based on previous conversations, I think I was expecting more underrepresented choral music, but those things cost money, I suppose. In her World Music class, however, she used self-composed polyrhythms and connected those to popular music as well as public domain melodies that matched the rhythmic content. Her rehearsal language was
neutral for the most part. Michaela referred to her students as *y’all*, but also by instrument in her World Music class and by voice part in the choral rehearsal, sometimes referring to the baritones as *guys*.

**Second hour conversations.** After the bell rang, Michaela closed the door and sat behind her computer. Yawning, she said, “I’m sure you were wondering why I speak both languages throughout my instruction.” I nodded. “Well, most of these students were just thrown in here and half of them are English language learners. We’re supposed to give 100% of our instruction in English because the district’s goal is that when they leave high school, at the very least, they should be able to communicate in English. But if I can help them to understand what it is that I want them to do, then I will continue to use both languages.”

The roar of the hallways could still be heard from behind the closed door until the loudspeaker came on.

**TEACHERS WILL CLOSE THEIR DOORS AFTER THE BELL RINGS.**

After the recorded voice finished their statement, a tone sounded multiple times until its last, long tone, followed by silence.

“Anyway…” Michaela yawned again. “This is my prep period so we can talk about stuff you saw from the last class period if you want.” I picked up my computer, sat in front of her desk, and scrolled through my notes to determine a good place to start. Since I had only observed choir, the obvious starting point was to talk about vocal modeling.

“It was nice to hear you singing for the baritones and the altos.” I started. “How does it feel for you when you sing for them?”

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14 According to the Illinois Report Card on Schools, 78% of the students at JESC are Hispanic.
She thought for a moment and sipped her coffee. “When I’m in the midst of the rehearsal,” she paused, “I guess I don’t really think about it as much until I’m working with my upper voices.” She set down her coffee and looked down at her computer.

We sat in silence.

Still looking down at her computer, she started again, “I have a weird relationship with my voice.” She chuckled and sighed. “I just don’t know. My voice is definitely…if I’m trying to pass… I try to speak as little as possible and if I do speak…I try to speak in my upper register…but so much of my voice has changed because of the way I am perceived.” She looked up. “I spent so many years forcing myself to always speak in a lower voice…and my laugh. I hate my laugh. My brother used to make so much fun of me for my laugh because it was so high pitched.” She yawned. “All of these years of self-conditioning to fix my voice to be more ‘like a man’…and now… I’m not a man, but I’m stuck with all these things and so, to hide my insecurity, I try to avoid speaking as much as possible.”

“I remember talking about this when we met on Zoom,” I responded, wanting to hear more. “It’s interesting that you actively silence yourself outside the classroom. Is that right?” I asked.

“Whenever I am outside of the classroom, mainly out in public and dressed in a femme presenting way, I try to present in a way that would make people assume that I am a ciswoman to protect myself from transphobia.” She grabbed her coffee cup and stood up. “The most difficult thing to conceal, however, is my voice, which is naturally pretty deep. Because of this, I try to speak as little as possible to reduce the possibility that I will get ‘clocked’ as a trans-femme.” She sat down and continued, “There is always a fear of transphobia when I exist out in the world, whether it is through physical or verbal violence. Within the school, I occasionally will also
conceal my voice if I know there are parents or outside community members around.” She turned away from me and looked back down at her computer.

We sat there for a few minutes until an announcement over the loudspeaker broke the silence. It startled us both and we laughed. She waited for the Charlie-Brown’s-teacher-esque announcement to end and continued, “But when I work with the choir… sometimes I’m just insecure especially when it comes to trying to support my sopranos.” She laughed again. “With my altos, I can kinda do it…well, I can do it in my own octave, but many of them are so new that they’ll… you saw them, they try to do it in my octave…so I’ve been trying to do a lot more circle singing so they can hear each other because using student leadership helps more than I am able to help. I should’ve done that today!”

She paused to do some work on the computer.

“I think I’m insecure today because I’m teaching choir …” She pointed at me. “And you’re here…and suddenly I kept losing all of the notes.” We laughed. “And the students will sometimes laugh at my attempts to sing their parts.”

“They laugh at you?” I asked.

“They do. But it isn’t malicious laughter, in fact, I think I often laugh at me more than they do.”

“Stop that!” I exclaimed. “I’m sure we can talk more about this topic later, but I think I should go use the restroom before the next class begins. Where might I be able to do that?”

“Yeah, I need to do that too.” She said. We both stood up. “The women’s staff restroom is up here. That’s where I’m going to go. The men’s staff restroom is on the second floor and the neutral restroom is on the first floor.” She handed me a set of keys. “I think this key will unlock the door to that one.”
“Great.” I reached for the keys. “I guess I’m walking all the way down the stairs. I’ll be back in an hour.” We laughed and walked to our respective spaces.

**Bathroom Usage**

The forced social labeling, or genderism (Bilodeau, 2013, p. 75) of the bathroom environment is something that Michaela and her trans students navigate daily. I was grateful for the neutral bathroom, but later learned that it was quite the hassle for students to use.

By the time I walked down and up the many levels of concrete stairs, Michaela had already made it back from the bathroom. “You beat me!” I said, dramatically pausing to catch my breath. “I know it’s weird to wonder, but I’m curious if you could tell me more about this whole topic.”

We laughed and shrugged our shoulders, acknowledging the reality of the struggles that trans folks face over a seemingly simple need, using the bathroom. “Well, I can’t remember if it was this year or last year, but I made the official, ‘I’m only using the women’s restroom’ announcement recently.”

“You had to make an announcement?” I asked.

She laughed. “I guess I didn’t actually tell people. I just made the switch to exclusively this one. Mainly because the first-floor restroom is just really far!” We both smirked. “But also, to be clearer that I am trans, and I do align more with womanhood than I do with manhood.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “I always have a level of anxiety when I go in there or when I’m in there and a person comes in,” she paused for a moment, “There’s always this level of imposter syndrome. Am I invading this space? There isn’t usually an issue with anyone, at least not anymore.”

“Someone had an issue with you using the women’s restroom?”
“Well, she did.” In a mocking tone, she impersonated the confrontation. “‘Why are you using this restroom? You should be using the one on the first floor, the gender-neutral restroom. This is the only restroom WE have!’” Michaela rolled her eyes. “Whatever! I just kept using it. And this year, there’s this one lunch person who just gives me a lot of dirty looks but it’s not a problem.”

“Bitches!” I said under my breath.

Michaela laughed in agreement and continued. “I hate that it matters so much.”

“I know!” I interjected. “I just have to pee. Who cares where I do it?”

“Right? Outside of school there’s so much anxiety about using the restroom and, depending on the way I’m presenting myself, I get really stressed about what restroom I should use in a particular moment. It’s a little easier in queer spaces but it’s a dissonant moment for sure, just thinking about restrooms and which one is gonna be safe. But at school, I feel a little bit more confident in my conviction because I know that the school policy\(^{15}\) protects my right to use whichever restroom aligns more closely with my gender identity.” She stood up to open the classroom door.

“That’s really great that a policy exists to help you feel safe in your decisions!” I added.

Michaela sighed. “But trans students have it a little harder. They have to give their school IDs to the office and get a key to use the neutral bathroom and then return the key to get their ID back. There didn’t used to be so many hoops for them to jump through, but some cis students abused the privilege by vandalizing the space, smoking in there, or having sex or other things. They don’t understand that the trans kids really need this space and now they have to jump through hoops just to relieve themselves.”

\(^{15}\) See Appendix L for further information surrounding guidelines for creating inclusive environments for transgender students.
Although the policy at JESC said it was inclusive for transgender and gender nonconforming students, the reality was that there was an inconsistency when it came to enacting the policy. The lived experience of the trans students at JESC was that bathroom usage came at a cost; they either went through the extra steps in order to relieve themselves, or they used whichever binary bathroom that they deemed safe enough.

The bell signaled the end of second period as students began coming into the classroom. “It’s nice though because I work with a GSA leadership committee in the district, and we talk about this a lot; how to make bathrooms more inclusive for our trans and non-binary teachers and students.” Michaela said as she walked back towards the door. “The bathroom issue is a real thing.”

Non-Music Teaching Responsibilities

Unlike Iroh, Michaela’s teaching responsibilities included supervising a group of freshmen each school year. This included things like assisting students with homework, facilitating conversations about pre-determined topics, and providing a study hall space for students to catch up when necessary. The third period students barged into the classroom, shouting obscenities as they made their way to their seats.

Freshmen Advisory. Michaela greeted students at the door and looked at me. “This is my most challenging class because the freshmen have no structure.” Although Michaela pointed this comment at the students as they came inside, nobody reacted. One student stood in the back of the classroom, trying to balance on an old water pipe that ran the perimeter of the classroom. Michaela raised her hand. “Okay, good morning…when you fall off that and break your leg, who is gonna’ get in trouble?”

“YOU!” the student shouted.
“That’s right, ME!” She said with her hand still in the air. She brought her hand to her hip. “They’re gonna be like, ‘Why did you let that student be standing there?’” The student laughed and reluctantly stepped down from his impromptu balance beam and sat on the window ledge.

Michaela turned her back to the class to grab her computer.

“YOU CAN’T BE IN HERE!” one student shouted at another student who stood in the doorway, eating popcorn.

“You’ve gotta’ go to your class,” Michaela pointed at the student in the doorway and motioned for him to leave, “especially since you didn’t offer me some of that popcorn! Now get to class.” A moment later, another pair of students walked inside. The bell had already sounded, but Michaela’s classroom door was still open. “Why y’all late?” she asked the students as they walked by her without response. “Ya know what, I don’t wanna know. Focus, focus. Okay, listen up!” Her low voice rose over the chatting students. “Now we know that quarter one grades are supposed to be posted on Friday and some of you haven’t done any of the work that you are supposed to, so what was the topic for the day?”

“Hey!” The balance beam student shouted towards the front of the classroom. “Fuck off!”

“I know you’re not talking to me like that,” Michaela shouted back. “Come on now. You have stuff to do. Get to work.” She walked behind her desk and sat down.

It was interesting to observe Michaela in this setting. Here is a teacher who has her PhD in Musicology who is dealing with the mini fires that the freshmen started in her presence, both figuratively and literally. Her transgender identity was neither visible nor invisible; Michaela was just another authority figure for students to disrespect and it had nothing to do with her identity as a trans-femme person.
Much of the freshmen advisory period was spent trying to use a district-wide website that included the prompts for conversation and space for students to post their assignments. It was down most of the class period. Since it was nearing the end of the first quarter, Michaela spent the majority of the time, troubleshooting with students and helping them find journal prompts. At one point, Michaela called a student up to sit next to her at her desk. “It seems like you’re frustrated today,” she said to a tall, lanky teen who slowly walked to her desk, “Where’s your Chromebook?”

“My Chromebook gone.” he said, reluctantly sitting down.

“Alright, well here, let’s just login to your account on my computer and get something accomplished today.” She handed the second laptop to the student. “Is there anything I can help you with?” The student did not respond. “How was your weekend?”

“Bad,” he answered as he looked at his phone.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Michaela responded. “Why don’t you put your phone down and login to my computer?” Michaela was doing everything she could to get this student to engage in conversation, but all of that hard work came to an end when a commotion sounded from the back of the classroom. Michaela and the student at her desk looked up.

“Y’all in the back,” Michaela grabbed a whistle from her desk drawer and blew it, “I need you to watch the language back there. I know one of you just dropped another F-bomb and while I don’t usually mind cursing, you’ve gotta be aware of when is the right time to curse! You have to learn how to codeswitch here!” She put the whistle back down on her desk and turned back to the student beside her.

I’d never known a music teacher to have a whistle in their desk, but I’d also never been in a school environment like this. Perhaps all teachers’ desks come equipped with a whistle? A
moment later, there was an almost eerie quiet that fell over the room until the sound of a lighter broke the momentary silence. Michaela looked up. “Wait, what? Are you burning something? What are you burning back there?” An unfamiliar burning smell started to come from the top of the classroom.

“A condom!” The student on the window ledge answered and his peer’s laughter spewed into the air. Michaela stood up, pushed her chair back with force.

“Wait, really?” Michaela asked as she walked briskly to the top of the stairs. She held out her hand out for him to give her the condom, walked with it back down to the trashcan, then pumped the hand sanitizer on her way back to her desk. Looking at her watch, she sighed, “Thirteen more minutes. Some days it’s like whack-a-mole.” Sure enough, thirteen minutes later, the bell rang. Michaela and I walked from the choir room to the band room right next door. The band teacher walked past Michaela into the choir room to prepare for piano class and we transitioned to the World Music class.

World Music

With her PhD in Musicology, Michaela asked school administrators if she could develop a World Music course. This was the second year that she had been teaching the music elective. The class took place in the band room, an open space, conducive to practicing the complicated polyrhythms, performed on djembes, double cowbells, and other hand drums that were in the closet. Before the bell rang, Michaela asked several students to help her grab drums and other percussion instruments from the closet. As the students continued to come inside, some were playing around on the instruments while others were too enthralled in their phones to even grab an instrument.
“Alright, y’all! We’re going to start by recalling what kind of notes these are.” Michaela pointed to the chalkboard where she had drawn quarter notes and eighth notes. “Great, I’m glad you remembered,” she went on after a couple of students responded. “Alright, you remember that word we learned the other day?”

A student in the back stopped playing on his phone and answered, “Poly something?”

“Yes!” Michaela said, raising her arm into the air. “You’re so close. Polyrhythms—perfect. So we can use those rhythms to play several different songs and I’d love to get you all to a point where you can play any part of the rhythm without issue, so let’s practice.”

Michaela seemed to be much more comfortable in this class. She was engaging, funny, and insisted that her students participate to a degree that she hadn’t insisted on in previous classes. After class was over, we walked back over to the chorus room. As we walked, I remarked, “You’re totally in your element in there!”

“Well, this is my field! I live for this class.” Michaela smiled as she took a deep breath and walked into her biggest class of the day, a 34-student guitar class. She started class still feeling the high that came from the World Music class, but it did not take long for the student’s disengagement to bring her back down from the clouds.

**Middle and Elementary School Teaching**

Before Michaela taught at JESC, she taught at an elementary school in the district as a long-term substitute. “I know that I’m not meant to teach younger kids”, she wryly observed. “My only other experience with the younger ones was during my student teaching and I struggled with being too abstract and kids are so literal.”

“It’s so true!” I agreed. “I love my kid, but I could never teach the little ones.”
“I had fun and got to act silly,” she recalled, “but it was a lot of work and I just identified as a cis man, so that’s how I approached my identity with those kids. It wasn’t easy and I was exhausted all the time.”

We laughed together. “I believe it. So, you were mister during those days?” I followed up.

“I was,” she shrugged. “I was not out at that point, in any way. I wasn’t ready to come out at work and using any gender marker other than male would just add anxiety to everything. I was only there for a couple of months anyway.”

“And I became doctor in that time and so I did get to switch to doctor and when I moved to the high school, I didn’t have to change my teaching name and I have only been known as doctor at JESC”, she said. “I’ve always hated the ‘mister’ honorific…since I was in high school…I always had a variety of excuses for why I hated mister, but it ultimately came down to not wanting to be a mister.” She continued, “And when I correct people, the ones who would say mister at the elementary school, it didn’t have to be about gender. ‘No, I’m not Mr., I’m Dr.’ I would say to them. I always felt kind of stuck in this masculine representation, even when I was called doctor at the elementary school, but it did get better when I moved here.”

Being “stuck”, feeling like she had to present as masculine was a theme that seemed to plague Michaela and I asked for her to journal about it. She wrote:

In my youth I was surrounded by lots of other boys who embodied many traits of toxic masculinity, including having to talk, dress, and exist in particular ways. After being made fun of for years for having too high pitched of a laugh, I developed a guttural laugh in the lowest part of my voice. I hate it.
Instead of developing my own ideas about fashion, I felt I had to dress the way my brother did in oversized clothes with short hair…there could be nothing seen as “feminine,” such as short shorts or tighter clothing. In my every mannerism, I worked hard to not come off as feminine, because then I would be called homophobic slurs. I couldn’t cry or I was a “girl” or seen as a “baby”.

Now, as I’ve come more to terms with my gender identity, I am having to unlearn these patterns of behavior. I’m having to force myself to break out of these things I’ve hated for so many years. It’s both freeing and it’s painful because it’s all I think about. I’m trying to reteach myself how to be more naturally me while also (mentioned above) grappling with how I should be accepted regardless of how I adapt myself to reflect my gender.

Michaela’s youth was rigidly stuck in notions of binary gender identities. She mentioned often having to unlearn specific things from childhood so that she could more freely live in the femininity that she had become more comfortable in. Her inability to access a feminine presentation as a child caused Michaela great discomfort and her feelings of safety and visibility at school led to fewer dissonant moments than other areas of her life. At school, she was able to present in a feminine way without fear of ridicule, or invalidation.

Dissonant Moments

Michaela invited me for dinner at a local Greek restaurant with her and her partner. I was excited to try Greek food, but I didn’t know going out to dinner came with a caveat not to discuss
Michaela’s gender identity. She warned me, “We don’t really talk about my trans identity at home. It isn’t that he doesn’t know, we just don’t talk about it.”

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Before leaving my place for dinner, I worried about how awkward this would be, considering the reason I was there, so I texted to ask, “Should I not use any kind of femme pronouns at dinner? What would you prefer?”

Quickly she answered with one phrase, “They/them is fine for me!”

“Alright.” I texted back. “I don’t want to make you feel unsafe with me and I want to be sure to honor you as you wish.”

“I really appreciate that!” She answered.

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I arrived at the restaurant and immediately noticed that all of Michaela’s “traditional” feminine gender presentation from earlier in the day, makeup included, were now conspicuously absent. The two of us waited inside to avoid the cold while Dave, her partner, parked the car.

“Hey gentlemen, how many today?” the host asked. A wave of euphoria shot through me that I had been addressed as a gentleman; but then, how did that make Michaela feel?

We were seated and Dave soon joined us. I knew that Michaela and Dave had been together for many years, but his gray hair and beard made evident the age difference between them. Dave sat down.

“Dave, it’s nice to meet you.” I began. He sort of smiled, but didn’t look at me while he put his keys in his coat pocket and took out his phone. I continued, “I’m glad we could make this dinner happen while I’m here. Thank you both!”

Michaela looked at Dave; she smiled nervously.
We studied the menu.

I tried again. “So Dave, Michaela tells me you’re a flight attendant. Tell me about that.”

Dave looked at Michaela. “I am. I leave tomorrow on a 3-day stretch, but at least it’ll be warmer there than it is here.” He rolled his eyes and looked back down at his phone.

“Yeah, I’m taking him to the train before school tomorrow.” Michaela patted Dave on the shoulder.

The waiter brought us our food. Dave continued to look at his phone.

Michela said to Dave, “Is your daughter okay?” She turned to me and explained, “His daughter came out as a lesbian recently and her mom is not handling it well.”

Dave looked up. “My ex-wife blames me for this.”

Continuing the conversation, Dave explained that he had spent much of his adult life suppressing his sexuality. He had two kids with his now ex-wife, who hated everything about the fact that he had left her for a man, which was how Michaela expressed herself when they had first met. Dave continued, “Yeah, my ex-wife hates him.” He pointed sharply at Michaela.

Michaela forced a smile. Dave chuckled, “You think she hates me? She hates him even more. It was his fault that I ‘broke our family apart.’ And now we have a queer daughter?!”

Silence.

We finished dinner.

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The entire dinner interaction left me with more questions than answers. Was Michaela actively silencing her trans identity for the comfort of Dave? Her entire femme-presentation had been erased, now made less than visible. In the context of dinner, Dave mentioned that his ex-
wife hated that he came out as queer. Dave had kept his sexuality invisible for so long and now that his identity as a gay man was visible, it was invalidated by his ex. It made me uncomfortable to watch as he, in my opinion, rendered Michaela’s trans identity invisible and I did my best to not allow our dinner experience to color the rest of my visit with Michaela, but it was starting to make perfect sense why Michaela’s sense of visibility and validation was so strong in her classroom.

On Being a Better Teacher. A couple of days passed before I saw Michaela again. She met me on her front porch on Thursday morning wearing heels and dress slacks and again, we walked to school. Once we arrived, the guard from Monday neglected to check my bag, or even get up. He motioned for me to grab my visitors’ badge and Michaela and I trudged up to the third floor where the three students from Monday were at the top of the stairs.

“Are these three slackers always waiting for you when you get here?” I asked as Michaela fumbled for her keys.

“Yes!” She turned towards the trio on the stairs. “They’ll be messaging me on Gmail chat, ‘Why aren’t you here yet?’ and sometimes they give me their breakfast.” Michaela ’s relationship with these students was marked by friendly interactions and playful banter but was still respectful and compassionate. She taught in ways that were what she had needed when she was a student. She encouraged students to open up by “modeling personal expression…and by welcoming students to be their own unique versions of humanness” (Hendricks, 2018, p. 157).

As we walked into the classroom, Michaela offered, “My own experiences as a trans person have resulted in me striving to be a better teacher each day – especially for my queer youth. It has made me more acutely aware of the way people present themselves and seek to be affirmed, regardless of whether they are trans.” She sat down in her chair. “In high school, I had
virtually no queer representation and the ones I thought might be, were adamantly opposed to talking about it. I also never knew that being trans was a thing. There were no trans people for me to see to ever be able to question my own gender identity without thinking it was a perversion or sinful.”

I sighed. “I hear you. I’m curious though what you mean by ‘better teacher’?”

“I really mean better by supporting my students’ various identities. My own struggles with my sexual and gender identity have given me a lens to a deeper understanding of the struggles my students might go through.”

Two of the three students of the trio raised their hands in approval. “Preach, Miss Girl!” I laughed and took note of this phrase’s direct opposition to the ways Michaela had been described at dinner. As the students lowered their arms she flipped her hair, giggled, and continued.

“I really just want my students to like me and being an openly trans teacher, the only openly trans teacher, makes me feel like I have to try harder to be one of their favorite teachers.” She shifted in her chair and the three students laughed. “I want them to have amazing experiences with trans people because our country is plagued with toxic and dehumanizing rhetoric about us.” The five of us nodded our heads in unison and Michaela crossed her arms over her chest. “Openly trans teachers are often called groomers or worse and they get vilified day in and day out.” She paused and released her arms. “I want to normalize trans people for my students, so they see that we are not what these media outlets push about us. I want them to see that trans people are real people with the capacity to show love and grace. I want them to leave school being outspoken allies or at the very least, willing, and able to defend their trans peers.”

The bell rang, signaling the start of first hour choir. I feverishly wrote in my journal about the statement, *trans people are real people with the capacity to show love and grace*. Next to that
statement I wrote, trans people, trans teachers, trans music teachers are REAL teachers. There was no other context and yet, it led me to question if this project has any specific implications for music education at large or if the issues that these participants were facing would be similar across education for all trans teachers, regardless of their field.

**Outside the Classroom.** Because Michaela’s classroom was tucked away on the third floor, she had very few reasons to leave her class during passing periods. On Thursday afternoon, she walked down to the office to get a COVID test. She waited until the crowds of people had died down, put on her mask, and left the room. About ten minutes passed and she was back upstairs. “You’ll never believe what just happened to me!” She walked towards me. “The lady who does the tests looked at me and said, ‘You’re the transwoman, right?’ I couldn’t believe it. We were literally just talking about my safety outside of the classroom.” She flipped the hair out of her face and adjusted her glasses. “She tried to make conversation about someone that she knows who is also trans, because we all know each other or something,” she scoffed and rolled her eyes. “It was just strangely uncomfortable.”

Since she was already in a ‘strangely uncomfortable’ headspace, I chose this time to jump back to our dinner on Monday night. “At dinner the other night, when the host called us gentlemen, and then Dave used he/him pronouns when he talked about you…how…what were you feeling?”

“I wondered if this would come up. I’ve actually wanted to address it.” she answered. “First, the host doesn’t know me, so him using gentlemen, didn’t really bother me. With Dave, I hate hearing him talk about me.” She crossed her legs. “I don’t necessarily think that my trans identity is invisible at home, it’s just…not as heightened as when I’m at school, if that makes any sense.” Intrigued by her story, I sat silently and waited for her to continue.
“At school,” she paused and looked to the doorway, “I get to dress up! That’s one of my favorite parts about coming to school. I get to be fully in my femininity, wearing makeup and dresses, whereas at home… it’s not that I’m not in my femininity, I’m also not in masculinity, it’s just… I’m just a blank canvas in a way.”

An awkward pause.

Then she went on. “I don’t really…it’s not…I just don’t feel…like I need to think about it in that space. I’m just very, very comfortable with my partner in a sense that I…” She stood up and grabbed her computer from the desk. “One of the things that I really love about my relationship is that when I do go home and take all of this off, I don’t have to think about how anyone else in the world is perceiving me at any given moment – I can just exist with or without it being tied to any kind of gender in any particular way. And so, I don’t know if visible would be the way I’d conceptualize it,” she paused, “I think it’s more just…I don’t know a better word for it but… absolutely when I do go out into the world, beyond my bubble at home… I constantly… I’m never not aware of how I’m presenting and how I’m being perceived, regardless of whether I’m full femme or dressed down with no makeup on. I’m always super self-conscious about not wearing makeup, because to some extent I do try to have some aspect of my femininity in my presentation regardless of whether I’m fully wearing a dress and heels.”

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In later communications with Michaela, I asked her more about her heightened sense of visibility at school. She shared:

I’m not sure what else to add to this. I feel like I am more confident and safer in my visibility at school. I have strong connections with admin and many of my colleagues to where there is a level of protection that I have in being able to present as my full self. At
home, I take it all off and live in my femininity without feeling like I have to present in any particular way. It's more of a level of comfort in my femininity that I have at home that I don't necessarily have out in the world (including school). Whereas I am more confident in my gender presentation at school, it feels like something I have to do in order to be taken seriously as a trans person. On days when I come to work presenting neutral, I always feel so much more insecure about how others might perceive me.

It feels like something I have to do – did this mean that while Michaela felt that her trans identity was visible in school, it was also invalid? If she felt like she had to present in a certain way in order to be taken seriously as a trans person, was this impacting her ability to vulnerably make connections with her students? Again this journal entry was an example of leaving me with more questions than answers.

**Heightened Visibility at School, for the Most Part**

Before the next class period began, Michaela and I sat in silence. I started thinking out loud. “It’s interesting. To hear Dave use he/him pronouns at dinner and then to hear she/her at school all day…”

“Well, I do tell my students that they/them is fine, but she/her is also fine.” She interjected. “My chorus students use she/her which is fine… it’s gender affirming, but I like they/them just as much and it feels just as good for me.” She paused. “I don’t know if I see myself fully in the binary, as a woman, but I’m definitely trans-femme.” She turned her computer around to show me the screen. “My headspace has been in a weird place anyway because yesterday they released the newest national trans survey (2022 U.S. Trans Survey, n.d.). It’s really long and I filled it out and everything; but yeah, so it is an interesting,” she switched
back to my questions, “I don’t like hearing him talk about me because when he does use he/him, I don’t know, I don’t hate it, it doesn’t cause me any kind of massive dysphoria, it just kind of more is annoying like, ‘Well that’s not really me, but whatever…”

We packed up our things from the band room and walked back to the choir room as I noted this sense of invalidation of her trans identity at home.

She continued. “Most of my dysphoria comes from my speaking voice and my laugh…and my facial hair…and body shape…,” she laughed. “I have a friend who is about to have his top surgery and we always joke about doing a trans-swap, ‘Here, you can have this, and I can have that’ kind of thing.”

“Wouldn’t that be nice?” I said as we laughed. “What kinds of things are present at school that maybe aren’t present outside of school when it comes to you feeling a heightened sense of visibility?”

Michaela thought for a moment. “I mean a lot of the clothes that I buy are work clothes, specifically femme work clothes. So a lot of my wardrobe is mainly intended to be worn here, as opposed to just regular t-shirts, jeans, stuff like that,” she answered. “I get a lot of comments at work from the cis women. Things like, ‘Wow, you dress up every day’ or ‘You make the rest of us look like we’re bumming it.’ Well, you are,” she chuckled, “but it’s also gender-affirming. I get to live in this femininity that I’ve not ever had access to in a way that’s free. And I have supportive admin for the most part. I do still hear incorrect pronouns and get misgendered regularly, but it’s not actively hostile or toxic in the way many other schools are. And as long as I’m here, I feel safe.”

“When you get misgendered in other spaces in the building do you ever correct folks…”

Michaela interrupted. “I want to, but no.”
“Is there something holding you back from doing that?” I asked.

She thought before answering. “I know I shouldn’t, but I feel… I feel like an asshole. But I remember I was talking about this the other night.” She pointed to a void, “You made the mistake. I shouldn’t be the one to feel uncomfortable for your mistake… you should!” She looked back at me. “But it’s just hard because I’m always actively trying to be positive in all of my directions at the school and I don’t like to feel like I’m constantly correcting people and building a wall a little bit.” She opened her classroom door. “I don’t know. On the one hand, I should correct people regularly and on the other, I’m nervous that it would make students not want to talk to me because they’re too afraid to make a mistake.”

**The Pandemic and Visibility**

The COVID-19 pandemic created many challenges for teachers and students across the world. For Michaela, the pandemic allowed her the space to experiment with presenting in more feminine ways. She had been hired by her district a month and a half before schools closed their doors. “I began my time at JESC using they/them pronouns and there wasn’t like one big moment where I was like, ‘I’m trans!’ but it has been a little bit over the course of the last few years,” she shared. “I went from expressing myself as predominantly masculine to presenting feminine and being at home helped me to become more comfortable in being myself. And I haven’t really had big problems.”

“Problems with safety or with being out?” I asked.

“I’ve heard stories about others being pushed around by other teachers, but my admin team has been very supportive and my students,” she chuckled. “I have a crew of students who will almost get into fights, they are absolute defenders of mine and I have to de-escalate situations sometimes.”
“That’s awesome!” I interjected. “You said something earlier about self-expression and coming out slowly, do you think the pandemic has helped you to come out . . .”

She interrupted. “I think so, yeah and since you know I started everything virtually, and then when we were back in person, I was like, ‘This is how I’ve introduced myself, but now this is how I express myself.’ It has been little by little. The pandemic has been terrible for many reasons but at the same time, I guess there’s a little silver lining for me.”

“I agree!” I said with excitement. “Can you tell me more about that?”

“The biggest silver lining, I think, was having more time to sit with myself and engage in thinking about who I am and how I interact with the world and what is right for me and who I am.” She continued, “And quite possibly the separation from other staff members…it felt a lot safer to come out when you don’t have to look at people,” she laughed. “And it gives people time to have their reactions away from me. I think that physical distance was important for me to really be myself.”

**Wearing a mask.** In our initial interview over Zoom, Michaela and I discussed many elements of masquerading, which included the use of the must-have pandemic accessory, the mask. “There’s really no safe place to be trans,” she began, “but I wear masks constantly now, even when I feel like I don’t need one, but it adds another layer of safety and not just from COVID.”

It was time for class piano, which meant we needed to shift from the chorus room to the band room. “I’ve noticed that when you leave the room, you put your mask on, is that a COVID-safety thing or a self-safety thing?” I asked as we pulled out two chairs to the middle of the room.
“Self-safety,” she answered immediately. “Of course, I’m aware of COVID, and I’ve had all my vaccines and boosters and such. But I put it on when I’m out and about in the school, and when there are a lot of students in the hallways. Especially with those students that don’t know me …I’m sure everybody knows that I’m the trans teacher…but with my mask, perhaps they’ll see me as a feminine person more than as a man in a dress.”

Ironically, Michaela saw the mask as a means to increase her trans visibility. She used the mask as a way of “foregrounding one self” and “concealing others” (O’Brien & Linehan, 2019, p. 1541). I wondered if she constantly felt like she was putting on a mask in the school setting. A couple days later we met on Zoom and continued this conversation. She began, “Really, it’s outside of the school environment that I feel the need for the mask. For example, I live three blocks from school, so I’ll walk out the door and put on my mask because if I’m wearing a full dress, or a long skirt, or anything else super femme…” she paused then laughed nervously, “. . . I don’t want to be the next story on the news.”

She sighed and looked away from the camera.

“When I started teaching,” she looked back at the camera, “I didn’t know…I was already…my egg had been cracked but was not fully open yet. I at least knew that I was not a man, but I masked in the metaphorical sense by dressing more masculinely because the political climate is such that violence against trans people is on the rise.” She looked away again.

“We can change the subject if you would like,” I said gently.

She took a deep breath, shook her head, swallowed hard and spoke. “I think once I began to feel safe, I started changing little by little, throwing a pair of heels in every now and then. I eventually began to present in ways that made me feel happy.” She sighed and we moved on from the subject.
A few months later, I sent her the transcript of this moment via email and asked if she had anything more to say. She responded:

I’ve been struggling a lot with how to reflect and talk more about this. It’s been on my mind a lot lately as I continue to try to exist in the world safely and freely. Today (it is currently December 3rd at 2pm), while I was driving home from getting a haircut and doing some thrift store shopping for a few new dresses and work pants, I instinctively put my mask on, despite being in the car by myself. I didn’t spend a ton of time on my makeup today, and even as I was presenting in a very femme way, I started hyper fixating on the perception of other drivers looking at me. Much like silence, the mask is used to cover up the parts of me that I feel insecure about, the parts that I fear will lead to negative responses. Even as I push my authentic self out into the world, I still depend on the mask that acts as some kind of shield from the possibility of hate in the world.

**Closing**

In one of her final journal entries, Michaela shared:

As a person, not as a teacher necessarily, but as a person, I’m constantly grappling with my own identity, and by engaging with others and learning from others, and being part of this research, or being able to connect… as I learn about others, I’m also learning about myself and it's fascinating… not always easy, but it's beautiful.

The interesting thing for Michaela was that through her teaching, one facet of her identity was always stable, that she was Dr. Michaela. And although she still struggles with other elements of self, she added:
I have long internalized so much hate about my existence and my body and the way the world sees me (or at least what I see when I look in the mirror). While I am always one of the first people to say that you don’t have to be anything other than yourself to be trans, it’s hard to apply to myself. I constantly struggle with whether I want to medically transition in some ways or if I should continue trying to learn to love myself in the body I have. I’m torn between wanting the world to see the version of me that I want them to see and wanting to make the world see me as me, regardless of how I present myself. It only becomes beautiful in those lucid moments where I do look at myself and see the progress that I’ve made in being myself and, even for just a moment, love myself.
CHAPTER 6: THE LESSON LEAVES, THE STORY STAYS – LILY’S STORY

As the combined 5th and 6th grade music class walked inside, Lily is seated at the drum set. “Welcome in, drummers! Today, we’re going to be learning about the hi-hat.”

The students walked in and appeared to be excited about getting the chance to be drummers.

“Well, why aren’t we playing yet?” An eager student asks as they walked inside.

“Wow, the sass! Well, you just got in here, now, didn’t you?” Lily said to the student. “Now, we’re all going to get a chance to play the hi-hat, if you want the chance to play it that is.”

The students take their turns playing, badly, an instrument that none of them has ever played. Some students start to laugh.

“If we mess up, I’m here to support you…” Lily stopped the laughter. “But we can’t keep laughing at each other and we definitely can’t keep talking between players because you’re just wasting your time. Show me you’re ready to continue…”

The students quieted down and Lily continued the lesson.

Introduction

In early November, I took my final trip of the project to New England. I left Champaign for Chicago early Thursday morning and arrived on the east coast in time to watch a late afternoon sunset over the autumn leaves. Lily picked me up at the airport and our plan was to go to dinner before she dropped me off at my Airbnb.

I walked to the curb. Lily got out of the car to help me with my bags. She was much taller than I had anticipated. We talked about her day from the airport to our dinner destination, a local restaurant for burgers and beers. While we ate, she continued the conversation about the expectations for the following day. After dinner, she drove me to my Airbnb, a micro-camper behind a hair salon, in the middle of a parking lot, across the street from Walmart, police sirens in the distance.
Early Friday morning the fog was so thick, it was like walking through sheets hung on a clothesline on a humid day. I walked to the street and waited for my Uber driver. Through miles of construction and fog, I finally made it to Lily’s apartment. I thanked the driver and walked up the driveway. Lily opened the door, “I’m almost ready! I made you a pot of coffee. Here’s a mug and the sugar. I need to finish my makeup.” She disappeared into the bedroom.

I helped myself to the coffee while she finished getting ready for school. We loudly discussed the plan for the day as she moved from room to room. When we headed out to school, the fog had started to lift and I could see the beautiful, New England, fall colors. As we pulled into the parking lot, I noted that the school appeared to be an interestingly configured bunch of buildings, surrounded by mature trees on all sides.

The Clover School (TCS) looked like it was originally one small building that had more sections of buildings added over time. Originally The Clover Center for Academic Advancement, TCS was developed in 1990 with a mission of cultivating creativity, curiosity, and collaboration with and among its’ students. The initial Heads of School, along with a group of parents, believed that TCS should be developed to serve the needs of academically gifted students in a space where teachers understood the specific needs of these students. TCS opened its doors with only eleven students enrolled but now had just under 200 students on campus, with an average class size of 15. Tuition driven, TCS welcomes students with above average ability who can readily access an advanced curriculum.

As we walked inside, we entered the great room, a large open space with cafeteria tables in the center. We walked past a stage, through the library where the sunlight from the skylights warmed our faces. We passed a small lobby with couches and a piano, several other classrooms,
and the school gymnasium, before finally reaching the music classroom. Lily’s room was a
good-sized room that was tucked away on the right side of the long hallway, across from student
lockers and next to an outside door which led to the playground.

**The Classroom.** Lily’s classroom was bright and colorful. She painted a mural on the
wall that showcased female musicians. It was also home to the guitars and ukuleles. Front and
center was the musical carpet which was where the lower school (grades pre-k through 3) would
sit for their music classes. The strings students sat just behind the carpet and the choirs stood on
plastic steps, using pillow cushions when they were seated. Students entered the classroom and
walked between two shelving units to begin each class. At the beginning of the day, young
strings players came in to drop off their instruments to their left and music folders to the right.

![Lily's Classroom](image)

**Figure 8 Lily's Classroom**

**The Curriculum.** Although there was no prewritten curriculum for the students at TCS,
there were benchmarks to be met throughout the course of their study. In a conversation with the
Assistant Head of School, Jake, a heavy-set, middle-aged man with glasses and a lip ring, he
shared, “We never say to our teachers, ‘Here’s your textbook, follow it.’ We say, ‘Here are your
benchmarks, meet them.’ The resources they use to meet those [standards] are completely
teacher driven.” Challenging the most gifted students seemed to be the primary function of TCS.
Jake continued, “We really pride ourselves on challenging these really bright students, which can
be really hard for them because we know these kids can get an easy A anywhere else, but they come here, and they work harder and sometimes do worse or feel like they’re doing worse.” He explained. “That means we spend a lot of time reminding them that they’re not going to get perfect scores, so we tell them, ‘Our goal is to help you build the skills you need down the line.’”

**Practicalities of Teaching Music.** For Lily, the curriculum was determined by the music that she selected for her students. When it came to selecting repertoire, Lily made every effort to use music by women composers. She also did a lot of arranging for her choir and had intentions of arranging for her strings classes. In class, it was not unusual for Lily to use the phrase, *you guys*, or call her students by grade level. Funnily enough, Lily was the only participant to slip and use *boys and girls* in her elementary general music classroom. I noted this in my journal during our first day together on Friday morning:

The giggles of the first graders could be heard coming down the hallway. Their teacher stood in the doorway and asked “Miss Lily” if they could come inside. She crouched down as the students entered and handed each student a laminated card that corresponded with a space on the musical carpet, their seat for the class period. Lily introduced me. As class continued the rowdy first graders started to forget that they needed to stay on their carpet space. “Boys and girls…friends. Friends, please hold up your cards and tell me what the sign on it means and remember to stay on that spot, we don’t touch each other.” Two of the first-grade students had been using their laminated cards as extensions of their hands, hitting each other with the paper. Lily stood up from the carpet, “Gentlemen! Really? We do not use paper for anything other than singing! My friends, it is frustrating for me to have to constantly remind you of the instructions.”
Although there were two instances of gendered language in this first-grade music class, Lily never used gendered language again in the classroom. We talked briefly and she brushed it off as something that she never does. She explained,

I knew you’d say something about that. And what’s funny is I rarely, if ever, use gendered language so I’m honestly not sure where it even came from. But I was like, ‘did I really have to do that with them here? What the hell, Lily?!’

**Fourth-Grade Strings**

One of Lily’s projects for the school year was to implement a fourth-grade strings program into the curriculum at TCS. As a cellist herself, Lily completely revamped the 4th grade music program in order to share her love of string playing with her students. Jake shared, “I will say, she did a lot of prep work in terms of, this is what it will cost, this is what it will look like, this is what the program will be, these are some questions that we need to ask parents—it would have never happened if she didn’t do all that work.”

Lily had gone through many steps to ensure the success of the new string program. Not only had she done her due diligence behind the scenes, but her process of preparing the students to learn a string instrument was different from anything I had ever observed. Lily described the process:

Before the instruments even arrived, students were given these little ‘pets’, their ‘case buddies.’ They were mini stuffed animals and each day that they brought it back, or that we met a musical milestone, I would give them a tiny, colorful hair tie. They could adorn their ‘case buddies’ with these bands as they saw fit. After we met so many milestones, I gave them their ‘bow,’ a pencil that I added tape lines which showed how they would
hold their real bow. Do students still forget their instruments at home? Yes, but it happens a lot more infrequently than I had imagined.

By the time I saw this group in action, the students had been working with their instruments for a couple of weeks. “Fourth grade! There are instructions on the board,” Lily announced as the students came into the classroom. “It means you have something to do while I’m helping you all tune your instruments.” Moments later a commotion interrupted the start of class. “What’s going on here?” Lily demanded.

“She moved the chair!” One student shouted.

“Y’all, I have other stands and other chairs. I’m gonna need you to move your chair back where it belongs!” She pointed, “Okay, go to number 13 and practice that on your own.” She looked at the class. “Wait, what do you think I’m looking for while you practice?”

One student started to respond but another student loudly interrupted to say he was not ready. “Okay, we’ll wait for you, but you didn’t have to shout at me!” The other students started to laugh and point at that student, but Lily put a stop to it. “You know what, we do things as a team, and I guarantee you that we’re gonna’ wait for every single one of you at some point while we’re learning.”

Lily went back to tuning student instruments as the fourth-grade class noodled through number 13. When they got to the end, they talked with their neighbors. When Lily finished tuning, she stood in front of the students, “I know you have a lot of feelings about what just happened while you were practicing and you have a lot of different thoughts, but when I have to spend so much time reminding you to stop talking, then we can’t get as good as we want to, as quickly as you want to. Okay, let’s sing this passage.” The students objected wholeheartedly to this suggestion. “Fourth grade! You know my expectations!”
The students stopped grumbling. Lily smiled and thanked them for their focus as they continued working from the strings book. When rehearsal was over, I wondered if Lily had interest in talking or if she just wanted to sit quietly for a moment. I asked, “When we first met on Zoom, you mentioned these ‘two-selves’ intersecting. Do you have the energy to talk about that right now?”

She sighed. “You know what, there are some spaces where my transness is irrelevant. Like when I’m teaching strings, my focus can only be on teaching strings. I don’t think I have space to think about anything else. You saw them!” Lily continued, “I guess I don’t feel the need to constantly intersect my trans identity with what I’m doing all the time – it’s obviously there.”

Lily knew that her identity as a transwoman was not always the identity to bring to the foreground. She was very much aware of the contextual shifts that needed to be made in order for her students to be successful. She continued, “One of the best pieces of advice that I learned while I was transitioning was that transness is just one part of your identity. When you’re transitioning, you’re working on so many things, but when you’ve finished your transition, then what? You’re lost. Your transition becomes your identity.”

I sat motionless at this beautifully profound statement. “I love that you shared this with me. It is certainly easy to only see yourself through your transition because it can be such a defining moment… Thank you. Truly, beautiful.” I noted in my journal that it was often the case, at least in my experience, that trans teachers might feel the need to constantly intersect their trans and teacher identities to ensure that they are visible as trans. There was something about the way that Lily already deemed her trans identity and visible and valid that she did not feel the need to constantly acknowledge that piece of her identity.
Diversity at TCS

In our initial conversation on Zoom, Lily mentioned that TCS was limited in its ability to define diversity. She explained that TCS primarily saw diversity as issues of race and sparingly about any other types of diversity. Jake, the principal, corroborated this in our Monday morning conversation, adding, “As a school we haven’t well-defined diversity…When it comes to diversity, it almost always comes down to race…but we also talk about gender identity and sexual orientation…but the gender identity thing is not always obvious …” He paused. “I’m remembering that some time ago we had a family that wanted to call Lily ‘mister’ and we knew it was wrong, but we were unsure of what to do with that…” With great hesitation he continued. “This is Lily’s story, so I don’t want to tell too much of it…but from our perspective we reminded that family that using ‘mister’ to address Lily was just not an option.”

“How did this situation go? Did you just tell the parents no or was there more to it?” I followed up.

“We actually decided to ask her [Lily], ‘How do you want us to handle this?’ because we didn’t want to just speak for her.” He continued, “We wanted to protect her, but we wanted her to decide which battles she wanted us to have…”

I hadn’t seen that level of support with Michaela, nor was it present in my own story, but I noted that it was also present in Iroh’s location. I wanted to hear about this from Lily’s perspective, so I asked her about it later that day. At first, I was met with a blank stare, as if the entire story was made up. “I vaguely remember an instance like this, but I don’t know if this was the story he was telling.” She searched her memory. “There was this little girl, I think in kindergarten, and she would call me mister. ‘But you sound like a boy!’” she mimicked the
kindergartener. “So I’d say to her, ‘I’m Ms. Lily,’ and she’d say, ‘well my mom told me that
God doesn’t let us just change, so I’m just gonna call you mister.’”

I noticed that Lily’s body language became tense as she continued. “I reminded her, ‘But
at school, we need to respect other people and in order to respect me, you will call me Ms. Lily.’
That’s really the end of that story and I don’t really know what happened next because she was
gone a few months later.”

“Geography” Club. A few years ago, the Spanish teacher at TCS, created affinity
groups for many different areas of interest as part of the school’s diversity, equity, and inclusion
goals. “This teacher came to me and asked, ‘Hey, do you want to be in my geography club?’”
Lily saw my confused expression and laughed. “I had the same expression when he asked! He
explained that when he was small that he read a book that talked about a group of students who
were questioning their sexuality and gender. They met at school but because it was unsafe to call
it a queer space, they called it the ‘Geography Club.’” We both laughed.

After the Spanish teacher left TCS, Lily recognized the need for this group but was
worried of inadvertently outing students. She worked with the diversity coordinator to determine
the best way forward. “There’s a survey that’s sent out at the beginning of the year and it
includes LGTBQ as one of the affinity groups, so students and their parents know about the
group, but they don’t know who is in it,” she explained. “Students know that it’s our group
because the emails will come from me or Jess, but we just call it ‘Affinity Group’. I tried calling
it Geography Club last year, but the kids were like, ‘I didn’t want to study geography,’ and I was
like, ‘Wow, I literally told you what this meant!’”
Lunchtime Affinity Group

On Friday afternoon, the first day of observations, about a dozen students came into the music classroom with their lunches. It was all-school pizza day, and the students came with oversized slices of pizza on flimsy paper plates. They sat quietly in the rehearsal chairs while Lily introduced me.

“How’s the pizza?” I asked.

“It’s good,” the students mumbled.

“Good. I hope you’re all having a great morning so far. This is M.R. and I know that some of you have expressed similarities to things in their journey so feel free to ask any questions that you want, cuz that’s what this space is for. I’m gonna go grab some of that pizza, I’ll be back.” She walked to the door.

I was surprised by the fact that Lily had shared any part of my journey with her students. Michaela had mentioned that I was joining her classroom, but not why, and Iroh introduced me and connected my presence to their trans identity, but Lily talked about me as a person. I wasn’t sure why, but I was not expecting to experience visibility and validation as the researcher of this study. As Lily left the room, her colleague, Jess, stayed and started the conversation.

Jess was a cisgender woman whose contagious laughter and smile lit up the room. “Can I ask a question?” she began. “And obviously, this goes for everyone,” she turned to the students, “you don’t have to answer anything that you’re not comfortable with.” She turned back to me. “As a group, we’ve been talking about coming out and what that means and what our experiences have been, would you be comfortable sharing your experiences with telling your parents?”
“Sure!” I started to share about my time coming out in high school but turned my focus to my most recent ‘coming out’ story. “It has only been the last four years that I started asking my family to not call me by my given name and use they/them as my pronouns. My mom sucks at it and she’ll say the wrong pronoun and I’ll remind her, and she’ll say, ‘Ya know, you’ve been *Miranda* and *she* for your whole life and this is too hard for me,’ and that really makes me angry.”

“At least she’s trying,” a student offered.

“She is, I suppose,” I went on. I continued to go through my story until another student asked about coming out to specific family members.

Lily returned with her pizza as we were talking about coming out stories. “You know, in this space, we can practice coming out to each other…not like today, but in this group.” She took a bite of her pizza. “We may not know how whoever you’re talking to is gonna’ react, but we can at least be a person in front of you and you can practice saying the words.”

The students nodded and sat silently until a wavering voice on my left spoke up. “Did you ever feel like you had to prove your identity?”

“Thank you for trusting me to hear that question,” I said to the student who I later learned had recently written a letter to a parent, sharing information about being transgender. “One of the things that has been helpful to me is to remember that everyone around me is also going through a transition of their own. It’s hard to feel like you need to prove who you are to somebody, and I hope that someday you don’t have to prove it to anybody other than you, my friend.”

With tears in his eyes he said, “I just feel like now that I’ve told them, I have to overcompensate.”

“Some parents will say it’s all a phase,” a student from the back row added.
Lily spoke up. “I had a phase as a kid where I really liked Legos, so my parents bought me Legos. But then I stopped liking Legos, so they didn’t buy me Legos anymore. So what if it’s a phase?!” She looked at all the students. “You’re just learning more about yourself, but that’s no reason not to still support you. So what if you change your pronouns more than once? So what if you change your name more than once? I did! Before Lily I tried Riley. You try new things as you want, phase or not, you still need their support” She took a deep breath, a quick bite of pizza, and sat back in her chair.

I had not heard another teacher try to comfort their students about their identity before. Not that it was not something that Iroh and Michaela did, it was just front and center with Lily and this group of young students. The conversation continued. Many of the students were silent while others wanted to understand why their parents’ thoughts of gender were so stuck in binary notions of what boys and girls liked. Jess reminded the students, “I think that it’s really silly to think that gender determines what activities you can partake in, but people think that. And I want you to know that what you’re feeling is real and it’s valid.”

The students sat up and focused on what Jess was saying. “And it’s hard when we’re kids because we’re learning about ourselves but we’re also learning that our parents make mistakes. They’re not perfect. They’re human, and that’s really hard to deal with, but it’s the truth. Our parents are fallible human beings.”

“I know this may not be what you want to hear,” Lily began, “but it’s not your job to educate people.” I shifted on my stool as I struggled to really honor these words, since it seemed that educating people was a major theme of my life. She continued, “You can, out of the willingness of your own heart, but it’s not your job. For example, some of our lower school friends ask me if I’m a boy or a girl and, in that moment, I have an opportunity to educate them.
on what it means to be trans. But I also have the opportunity to take a rest from that and not do that work because it’s exhausting having questions like that.”

“Then what do you say to them?” a student asked.

“My response to them is this: ‘We don’t usually ask people questions like that.’ The questions stop for that moment.”

The chaotic sound of middle school students coming in from recess began to invade our quiet, reflective space. “Unfortunately, we are out of time for today. Can we give our guest a round of applause because I think this was a fantastic discussion – do you like having a guest speaker?” The students nodded enthusiastically as they tossed their pizza plates in the trashcan on their way out the door.

Before the bell rang, Lily said to me, “The most important thing about this group is how to keep something in confidence. So we tell them, ‘The lesson leaves, the story stays.’ And today’s lunch was filled with more kids than we usually have. I think that might be marking a shift in how TCS is beginning to process gender and sexuality.”

Lily’s Coming Out Story. During our first conversation on Zoom, Lily and I swapped our coming out stories. She spoke of her experiences teaching music at a summer camp, which included her first interaction with a trans woman. “My first year at camp… I wasn’t out… but slowly over the course of the second summer, I cared less and less about what to wear.” She paused for a moment. “This was the summer of 2019 when I first presented as female. It was a huge turning point for me.” A proud, almost blushing, smile appeared on Lily’s face. “The previous summer I met another trans woman, and I was enamored by her. I had such a crush! Just seeing her go about her day, working with kids, that was what I needed to see to know that I could do it. It was possible.”
Earlier in the conversation Lily mentioned that she struggled to come out because she never had any positive representation of what being a trans woman could look like. She explained, “Part of what kept me from moving forward with my transition was finding who I thought was a ‘normal’ trans woman as a role model. I didn’t know many prominent trans women and the ones I did know were activists and I didn’t want that lifestyle. But she was a trans woman who was fearless and breathtaking with the most grace and humility I had ever seen in a person. She didn’t have to do or say anything; the biggest impression she made on me was the fact that she was just living her life.”

We both smiled and raised our glasses for a virtual toast. Lily continued, “She truly made me feel like, ‘Hell yeah, I CAN do this! If she can, I can too.’ So that fall after camp, I started taking hormones and thus Lily was born.”

“Did you ever have any worries about your transition when you were teaching?” I asked.

“I did have a couple of worries,” she responded. “I worried about how these two-selves would intersect and I wondered if the kids would take me seriously. My biggest worry was how the kids who knew me before, at the camp, would react to me now, and you know what, the world did not set on fire, no one died, and miraculously some great learning happened,” she beamed. “That summer was a bit like living a double life though. At camp, I was Lily. I was accepted as Lily. But on social media, I was still presenting as my old self. Then one day in early July, I woke up and decided I had had enough. I was clearly making it work as Lily and although I wasn’t super sure what I wanted to do after camp ended, I pushed forward as Lily and now have the life I have.” Lily had visible representation of a trans woman at camp, but I wondered about her connections with colleagues in her current situation.
Connections with Colleagues

On Friday afternoon, Jess returned to the music room. “How was the rest of lunch?”

“It was great!” Lily responded.

“I was so excited for our friend who shared today! I didn’t know that he had come out to his parents—low key, huge event!” exclaimed Jess.

“I know! He doesn’t usually say stuff like that,” Lily answered. “I asked the students if it was helpful to have guests and they all agreed, so we should figure out how to be able to do that.” She turned to me. “Thank you so much for being here for that, it was such a great job of helping explain things to them.”

Jess interrupted, “Yeah, and it’s good that it isn’t always just Lily and me.”

“True and I was telling them”, she pointed to me, “that we can always try to facilitate these conversations, but we still have to be their teachers and that’s something that a visitor doesn’t have to do as much, you don’t have that layer of professionalism,” Lily observed as Jess picked up the train of thought.

“Speaking of professionalism…I did drop the F-bomb at our first meeting.” I was shocked but not surprised based on our previous interactions. “I went big!” Jess laughed. “We were talking about how you’re not meant to be friends with everyone, and I told them,” she turned to the empty chairs, “‘if someone doesn’t connect with you or value you, fuck ‘em!’” She preached, “You don’t need to have everyone in your life, ain’t nobody got time for that shit—okay, I didn’t say the second swear, I did that for you.” We laughed. Jess gave a “mic drop” gesture and walked out of the classroom.

Dinner After School on Friday. Every so often, Jess and Lily would get together with three other teachers from TCS for drinks and dinner. They referred to this social event as “going
out for waffles” when talking about their plans around the students. Lily invited me to join the group that evening. I was grateful to be included because it meant that I didn’t have to go back to the micro-camper so soon, where the door wouldn’t lock, and the constant sounds of sirens made me feel unsafe. When Lily and I arrived, Jess and the others had already been there long enough to be at least one “waffle” ahead of us. We sat down and Jess quickly made sure that we had menus while others pushed their plates of appetizers down to our end of the table. The community of women, cis women, had embraced Lily as one of the girls. These girls’ nights were a frequent occurrence for them.

A couple of hours later, Lily and I decided it was time to take me back to the micro-camper. “I’m grateful to have been invited tonight.” I said on our way out the door. I walked slowly. “Does this happen often or is this just for show?”

“We don’t do it every Friday, but it happens often.” Lily said over her shoulder at me as I struggled to want to match her pace. “Now that you’ve met them all, I’m sure we could find you another place to stay so you wouldn’t have to feel so uncomfortable at your current space.” She stopped in the middle of the parking lot.

I caught up. “I feel like that would be too much of an imposition, don’t you?”

“No!” she was adamant. “You heard them, ‘You should have stayed with one of us.’ They’re all safe people. I know you didn’t know them yet, but I bet we can find something.”

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Lily texted me Saturday morning. “I’ll be there soon, bring all your stuff, we won’t be coming back this direction.” I packed my bags faster than the contestants shoved groceries into their carts on Supermarket Sweep and awaited her arrival. It turned out that Jess had offered up her guest room.
A short while later, Lily arrived. She had dropped her partner off at the comic convention on her way to pick me up. I rushed outside and there she was, She-Ra\textsuperscript{16}, in all her glory, standing with her sword of protection drawn. “Do you know who I am?” she asked. I had no idea. “I’m She-Ra from the *Masters of the Universe* franchise. In the reboot\textsuperscript{17} of this character, she’s queer, so it works. I don’t know if I’m ready to pose for pictures with strangers, but here goes!” We drove downtown.

Once she had her fill of visibility as She-Ra, we met back at the car and headed to Jess’s house. When we arrived, Jess was not home but Lily knew that the back door would be open for us, and Jess knew we would beat her there. We walked inside and I was welcomed by Tinsley, the cutest, shaggy haired dog, ever. Lily showed me my new room. She reminded me, “Jess bought this house after her parents died and she bought it with the intention of helping people who needed a place to stay, so she said yes without hesitation.”

Without Lily’s connection to Jess, I would have remained in the micro-camper, the police sirens, my lullabies. Instead, I was left in an amazing space with some pet therapy, and plenty of snacks that were all up for grabs. Lily headed back to the convention center to pick up her girlfriend and left me at Jess’s with Tinsley. It would be a few hours before Jess came home, so Tinsley and I enjoyed the hammock outside until she came home and invited me to join her inside.

**Visibility through Education**

Lily and I talked at length about the ways she felt seen in her teaching environment. “My colleagues are supportive and unsure of how they can be helpful. I’m starting my fourth year

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\textsuperscript{16} She-Ra is the twin sister of He-Man. More information can be found: https://he-man.fandom.com/wiki/She-Ra
\textsuperscript{17} She-Ra and Catra are in a queer romance in the reboot. See more information: https://www.rollingstone.com/tv-movies/tv-movie-features/she-ra-reboot-netflix-queer-creator-interview-1013623/
here and I am still the only, to my knowledge, trans faculty member and it is a little isolating at times.”

Supportive Colleagues. On Monday morning, the last day of observations, Jess, the teacher from the lunchtime affinity group and my new roommate, drove us to school. Lily often referred to Jess as her sister and spoke fondly of their friendship. Lily shared, “When I first started getting into makeup, I’d go over to Jess’s house and she’d be like, ‘Actually, can you look away? I don’t want you looking at me because you’re so damn good at your makeup.’” We both laughed and she continued. “It’s very surface level, but it’s also very validating. She has been the biggest solace and even though she identifies as cis, we’ve found remarkable similarities in our journeys.”

“That’s interesting. Tell me more about that.” I said as I sat down on the futon behind her desk, next to the classroom window.

She sat in her desk chair and turned it towards the classroom door. “Four years ago, she lost both of her parents and ever since, grief has been a huge part of her identity. We’ve connected in that we find it hard to think about employment elsewhere because we’d have to come out again and relive our trauma—the trauma of transitioning is what I like to call it. We’ve established many other similarities since we met, and she has been a great resource in helping me to understand my feelings. I don’t think I’d feel as seen in this environment if it was not for Jess.”

Another supportive colleague of Lily’s was Jake. Before Jake was the Assistant Head of School, he taught math at TCS. In the fall semester of 2020, the pandemic year, teachers were tasked with creating instructional content that would work in the classroom as well as in the online environment. While this blended style of teaching (Singh, et al., 2021, p. 139) was an
added layer of stress for Jake and the other teachers at TCS, it also became a means of making connections both with students and with each other. “Lily is a good person to talk with,” Jake shared when we chatted early Monday morning. “During the pandemic we were all siloed into specific cohorts. Lily and I were in the same cohort, so I felt like I got to know her pretty well. Of course, COVID itself sucked, but I got to make connections with the students and teachers in different ways and connecting with Lily was a highlight of that crazy part of our career.”

**Supportive Students and Challenges.** On the first day of observations, Friday morning, a young student told Lily how much she loved her dress. I wondered how that student’s compliment had made Lily feel, so I asked, “What does it feel like when kiddos give you such compliments about your attire?”

“That’s an interesting question,” she began, “I have two answers – a professional and a personal answer. Professionally, I try to not put the focus on appearance because as a teacher I want to be sure that I’m bolstering things that students can choose and grow. Personally? It really helps to soothe the imposter syndrome because here are these, presumably, cis girls who are suddenly looking up to me for fashion,” she joked. “Working with kids can be frustrating and rewarding. Rewarding because they will give you honesty and validation if you deserve it, but frustrating because they will also call you out on your bullshit.”

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On Monday afternoon, Lily sat behind her desk while we ate lunch. I sat near the window and could feel the warm sun on the back of my neck. “On Friday, a week or so ago,” Lily got up, stretched, faced the window to absorb the radiant light, and spoke sotto voce, “that student from our lunchtime group came in after school to see if he\textsuperscript{18} could talk to me. He was clearly

\textsuperscript{18} This student still used masculine pronouns in the context of school.
uncomfortable in his own skin, and he said, ‘I put a letter on the counter for my parents and I know they saw it and I don’t know how to feel.’ He’s the first trans-femme student that I’ve had and I got choked up. It was the first time in a long time that I was able to see myself in someone that was sitting right in front of me, and it was hard for me.” She paused. “I was so proud of him for telling his parents, but I was still his teacher and I had to choose my words carefully because I didn’t want resentment to build between him and his parents. They’re doing what they’re doing out of love and ignorance and even if I don’t agree with what they’re saying, it is my job to tell the students to work with and respect their parents, and that’s why finding my boundaries at school has been so important!”

Lily was a great model for why boundaries were so important. Talking with her about her own boundaries made me wish I had met her when I was going through all of my hell in my own teaching experience. Had I only known how to create healthy boundaries, maybe I would have had a better experience.

**Visibility and Boundaries**

I noticed throughout our conversations that Lily was always aware of her own personal boundaries. “I like to pick and choose my battles of when I want to be visible and educate people and when I need to hide and rest,” she explained. “In my second year here, so the Spring of 2021, I was feeling a lot more confident about my transition, and I wanted to use this confidence to share my journey.” Lily developed a presentation in two parts for all of the upper school students. With the support of administration, she presented it four different times for students in 5th through 8th grade. “It was a pain in the ass to figure out the scheduling, and I don’t think I could do it again because that’s not where my work is best utilized, but I did the presentation in two parts, one was just general LGTBQ topics and the other was my journey, kinda’ like your
dissertation has been for you. This presentation was kind of like my ‘coming out’ to my school community, even though most of my colleagues already knew, but this time I was telling the students.”

Lily opened presentation notes on her computer, “I had a pretty rockin’ beard back then.” She clicked away from the picture before I could reposition myself to see it. “I remember, I prefaced the second presentation, my story, by telling them that I was pushing back a certain boundary so they could feel comfortable asking questions that they might not usually ask me as their teacher. And as wild as these kids can be, when you set your boundaries, they really do follow through and I made sure to tell them that after the presentation was over, ‘After we’re finished, the space that I’ve created for us to have these conversations will be closed, but for now you are able to ask questions in good faith, be intentional with your language, and know that if I’m not comfortable answering a question, I won’t answer it.’”

Lily scrolled through her presentation notes, skipping past each of the pictures of herself pre-transition. “Did you see the title of the presentation?” I shook my head no. “Since my name is Lily, I used Blossoming as the title for this part.” She beamed. “It was rewarding, and not just because I was making different connections with my students, but also because my colleagues were there. They could see the things that I was going through and the ways that it was different than what they were going through as a teacher, and we’ve talked about how my difference isn’t as noticed as much as I would like it to be. Not that I want to stand out as someone different just for the sake of being different, but I want my identity to be respected.” Students began to congregate outside her classroom door.

“Give me one more minute, please…” she continued talking as she walked to the center of the classroom. “It’s like when people say, ‘Well I don’t see race, or I don’t see gender.’ I want
to tell those people, ‘Okay, well, I fought my whole life to be this gender, so I need you to see this gender. I don’t care how you see anyone else’s identity, but see me when you are in front of me or not’ and again, if I don’t have to do the work and not be the point person for all of it,” she gestured for the students to come into the classroom, “but being a teacher means that I have to just be that educator sometimes,” she smiled at the students in front her, “whether I like it or not, huh?” The students nodded and giggled.

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A couple of weeks later, Lily posted the following in her study journal:

As a trans woman, I want to be perceived as a woman. I want all the blessings and curses that come with womanhood. I want someone to see me and think “That’s a genuine, 100% grade, bona fide woman.” When someone asks me my pronouns, I truly do get that they’re being polite, but it still hurts a bit because I can’t help but think that my appearance wasn’t enough to speak for itself. Intellectually I know that it says more about them than it does about me. I still can’t shake that feeling because I know that if I was a cis woman they wouldn’t ask.

When I told my 4th graders that I had a girlfriend, a kid (with impulse issues, I’ll give him that) shouted out “So you ARE a boy!” I corrected him by saying that girls can have girlfriends too and he was all like “Oh yeah…” It’s tiny comments like that throughout the year that really make me wonder how my students really see me. Do they see me as a woman? Or just someone who they know who uses she/her and goes by “Ms.”?

I’m not sure. I’m even more unsure of whether I want to know the answer.
My immediate response to the above journal left me wondering about the gesture of asking someone their pronouns. Lily’s comments prompted thoughts of implicit versus explicit pronouns – “If I was a cis woman, they wouldn’t ask” about her pronouns. This dissonant moment for me led to further questioning of visibility and validation for trans music teachers. Are we visible if you ask us our pronouns? Or is it that we are visible through your question but perhaps our identities are not valid?

**Dealing with dissonant moments.** On Monday afternoon, the two of us stood there silently, enveloped by the warm blanket that the 78-degree November afternoon provided. “It’s really hard to navigate these conversations.” Lily sighed as she watched the trans-femme student from the affinity group wander the playground, alone. “I don’t know what’s going to happen for him, but I do know that he’s starting to get into territory that’s encroaching upon my experiences and trigger points and areas that I still haven’t overcome.”

“I could feel myself talking with them,” I noted Lily switching this student’s pronouns as she shared her thinking, “I wasn’t getting physically emotional in front of them, but I started feeling like I was telling him things that I would have wanted to hear and not even really knowing what to say. I’ve come out and I’ve experienced being a trans woman in the world and stuff, but I don’t know what it’s like to have to convince your mom, to have to prove yourself like they do.” She looked away from the student and back to me. “I told our counselor. I told her that I can be that support for this student to vent to and I can be the education for them and for the counselor. I can be involved, but at some point, I must be a professional about it because we’re getting into my trigger points. And considering I haven’t been able to overcome these, I just need to stay objective.”
Recess duty was over so made our way back inside the building. “I want to tell this student, ‘I’d be lying if I said that being trans was all roses and perfume or whatever, but I think it would be good for you to sit in this uncomfortableness and just ride the brakes. Sit in the discomfort with your parents because there is nothing that you can say now that is going to make this any easier.’ I know that’s what he’s searching for, the answer to how to do this,” she gestured to her figure.

This student, like many students, wanted instant relief from the stress of telling their parents about their gender identity. “He’s the kind of child to take something and run with it,” Lily said, “and sometimes, that works great, but in this case, I just want to look at him and…” she lowered her hands and pushed down on the air in front of her and continued, “… I want to tell him, ‘Hey, slow down, you have your whole life ahead of you. You don’t need to do that now.’ And I hope his parents can work with him.”

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Before my trip to visit Lily, she wrote about dissonant moments for trans students at TCS:

I feel like I am often the only faculty member that reminds other faculty of student pronouns. I still don’t see other faculty members step in when they hear microaggressions towards me. We literally ALL took a sexual harassment training program this year that had a trans woman experiencing microaggressions at work as an example.

Lily sent me a screenshot of an email that she sent on a Friday afternoon before my visit. She sat in her car and emailed the faculty:
In the same journal entry, Lily wrote:

I’m the kind of person that after I ask for something big like this, I don’t want to be confronted on it for a while, so I made sure to hit send and drive away immediately. Later in the evening, I got a text from Jess. She was checking in on me. She’s the exact kind of friend and coworker that you want in your corner. When Monday came, no one really said anything, but later in the week, our school counselor pulled me aside to ask some further questions and we talked about adding trans education resources to our school website, but we haven’t done it yet. It was nice of her to reach out though.
“I don’t want to say my colleagues are transphobic,” she wrote, “but as a transwoman, I often struggle to watch them interact with the few trans students at TCS. And as the only trans teacher at TCS, I often feel isolated.”

I was curious about her observations, so I wrote the admittedly haphazard journal prompt for her to consider:

The other day you mentioned not wanting to be the only one defending trans students. I don’t quite know how to ask it, but I wonder if you might talk about how your identity as trans-femme influences the way you see cis folks supporting or not supporting trans students.

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A few weeks after my time in the New England area, I received her response:

I think part of the issue is that I am greatly attuned to anything gender related. I kind of have to be. I’m always observing people and evaluating how they treat me regarding gender.

- What pronouns are they using?
- Are they interacting with me in the way they would their cis female friends?
- Do they really believe I’m a woman or are they just humoring me?
  - (Ok that last one is just my own anxieties, not based in reality…)

Therefore I am more observant regarding gender when it comes to other people as well. When a student uses they/them and in a faculty meeting they’re referred to as “she,” I’m the first to notice and usually the only one [emphasis added] to say something. Last year, our student support coordinator reached out to me asking for help in helping a non-binary student understand that it takes time for other people to use the proper pronouns
for them. I explained to her that even if their teachers only messed up once a class, that amounts to 6-7 instances of misgendering a day which is a lot for a middle schooler to handle - especially one who does not get that affirmation at home.

Lily continued to reflect: While obviously it’s virtually impossible for everyone to be able to make a pronoun switch right away, the emphasis should be on everyone else learning the correct pronouns, not making everyone else feel better by telling the student that they need to be ok with the fact that it’ll take time. This all being said, I wouldn’t say that all my colleagues are transphobic. They’re supportive and unsure how they can be helpful, even when I’ve asked for help in certain areas. This is where their “diversity = race” can get frustrating because people maybe do the work when talking about race but do next to nothing about gender and therefore feel helpless when asked to not be bystanders.

That’s an interesting prompt, how my identity as trans-femme influences my observations. I’ve thought about this prompt for weeks and I’m still unsure if I have a decent answer, but here’s what I’ve got. Generally, as a trans person, seeing how my colleagues interact with trans students can be difficult (especially when such interactions are not positive from a gender identity standpoint) because I have to wonder if they would treat me the same way if they had the chance. [emphasis added] Had I come out just a few months later, I would have gotten my job under my deadname, and would have had to come out to everyone – just like many of our students.

The pressure to be perfectly feminine impacts everything we do. It starts with appearances, but goes deeper into interactions, speech, temperament, etc. This pressure seeps into every interaction and perception. Perhaps too much so, for me at least. Part of
that pressure is perfectionism and emotional labor—expectations on women to be prim, proper, and household manager while not superseding the authority of the patriarchy. (This then definitely feeds into some of my issues with control but that one’s on me, lol.) When a student comes out to me, all I want to do is be warm, caring, and make everything perfect for them. When I don’t see that from other teachers, I get hypercritical. I get hypercritical of anything related to gender.

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A Normal Life

After school on Monday, Lily and I drove to a gardening center that also had a café. We sat outside amongst the unearthed trees and shrubs until they closed for the day. “I’ve been thinking about student compliments a lot today.” She said as she took a drink. “I think when I first started teaching as Lily, I thought more about the way I looked, but I don’t focus a whole lot on my transition anymore. Obviously, transness is something that I can never escape and will forever be something that I think about but now I get my nails done, I go shopping, I do my makeup, I go to work.” She paused and sat back. “I have a normal life now. Sure, I got to it through extraordinary means, but I have a regular life and compliments about my dresses are just part of that normal life.”

As our time came to a close that Monday afternoon, she passionately stated, “You don’t always need to educate people! If we’re always in those conversations then I feel like it’s signaling to other people that this is something that is up for debate.”

“I get it,” I answered and, in that moment, started to question the entirety of this dissertation. “It’s an interesting way of looking at it. Tell me more.”
“I love that you’re doing this project because then I don’t have to be the one directly educating people. I’ll do the work here when I have to, but I’m grateful for this project.” She laughed and patted me on the back. “And I think the world needs both kinds of people – people who are on the front lines, like you and people who are just living their lives, like me.”

Relieved that the premise for my doctoral study seemed useful, I commiserated, “I love this idea of ‘My identity is not up for debate’ because the more we debate this fact, the more you’ve turned me into an object and less of a person…”

“It’s not up for debate!” Lily interrupted.

I raised my hand in the air, “Preach, sister!” We both laughed and checked the time. The employees had set about doing their closing tasks even as we were in no hurry to leave. “It looks like we probably ought to wrap up so these folks can go home soon. I am so grateful that we were able to make this work and I’ve thoroughly enjoyed being here with you, Lily. I know that these last couple of days have been another day at work for you, but for me,” I wiped the pretend tear from my cheek and Lily laughed, “it has been wonderful, and I appreciate you.”

We gathered our things. “It might have been just another day at work for me, but what this project has already been, connecting with you. . .” We remained in our seats a moment longer and Lily continued. “I remember that first zoom meeting we had. It was very reaffirming, like, ‘No, all the things that I worry about are okay to worry about, even if I am led to believe that they are the most mundane things,’ and that’s not a kind of affirmation that I can get from anyone else because they don’t live it. And it doesn’t mean the same thing if Jess told me the same exact thing as you said it. Cuz as much as I love Jess, she’s not trans. And she’s got a lot of thoughts and opinions and so that’s why this work, your work, has been meaningful and it made me really happy and proud to be able to turn something that has been so difficult into something
powerful with you. I’ve felt almost a feeling of pride, parading you around and showing you the town. I’m just so excited that you’re here and that you’re doing this work.”

“I’m really glad to hear you say all of that. I often wondered if you all thought I was obnoxious in texting you every week,” I shared. “I thought, ‘Shit, am I telling them that I don’t trust them by texting them?’ so I’m glad that you at least didn’t find that part obnoxious.”

She laughed. “I don’t think it’s obnoxious and I don’t know what the hell the other participants thought, but every time you texted me, even if I didn’t respond every time…executive dysfunction…but I always thought, ‘That’s really nice of them.’”

We grabbed our things and stood up from the table. “I think it speaks to the starvation that people like us have for connection, authentic connections can be so hard to find, and you met my friend crew and they’re lovely but I’m still yearning for this other kind of connection with people that I’m missing—people more like—more how I experience life.”

Closing

It was a Monday afternoon in February, a day when Lily would typically be in school, but was off thanks to the federal holiday of President’s Day. We spent time together on Zoom just catching up and talking about the ways music education might benefit from hearing her story. She said, “Music is a human artform! And we are humans and I feel like that’s something that gets lost a lot. I feel like we’re expected to come to work as emotion-less drones, someone who is perfectly emotionally stable. And humans bring their own stuff into the classroom, not just trans, non-binary, and gender nonconforming folk, we ALL do it. And if music is a human art form, shouldn’t we get to know each other a little better?” She paused and collected her thoughts.

“I think this goes back to our first conversation. The fact that we had similar experiences and that we connected over our experiences was enough. It was enough to be like, ‘Wow, all of
these things that I’ve been worrying about are actually valid to worry about’ and somehow that made me worry about them less. It made me think, ‘If other people are worrying about these things, then I probably don’t have to as much.’”

After we talked a little more about that, Lily changed the topic to what it was like to read a draft of her chapter. “I went to Jess and told her, ‘This is really weird’ and Jess was like, ‘Good weird, bad weird?’ and I said, ‘It’s weird that someone followed me for 4 days and wrote down everything I did and said and I got to read it back as if it was a court transcript or something and it was just—it just felt like it was a wonderful way to be seen through this narrative. And I don’t think I really do stellar work in my classroom. I’m learning how to be a music educator and I’m trying to do things in a different way and figure things out so I’m never gonna’ get recognized, or be seen, for having a huge ass, amazing choir or orchestra. So that ability to feel seen through the narrative was odd at first because I’d never thought that something like this was going to happen—and not that every trans person needs a narrative written after them, although they all deserve it—but being able to know that I felt seen and anyone who reads this will see themselves in one or all of these stories. They’re gonna’ find themselves somewhere. It’s that human element and music is an emotional, human art and if we don’t have the space to express our emotions and feel seen as human, then are we really making music?’”

I asked if she had any last thoughts to share with those who would read her story. She answered, “When I was student teaching, I had to teach at an elementary school and a high school. And my host teacher was trying to get me ready to take over the classes at the elementary school and I was freaking the fuck out. I had no idea what to do, so I went to her to ask if she had any ideas, know what she said? She said, ‘I don’t really care. The most important thing at the end of the day is that they’re making music together.’ So that wasn’t helpful…” We both laughed.
“… but it was something that really stuck with me. Every day is not going to be my greatest lesson, but at least I made them do something musical.” She paused. “I feel like with all this focus on transness and being in the classroom and what that is like, we’re still keeping it student centered. And we can still hold space to think about ourselves but at the end of the day, we’re still music teachers, we can still make music. That’s the goal. That’s what we want to do.”
CHAPTER 7: BEING TRANS, BEING HUMAN

Introduction

When I set out to do this study, I knew that I wanted to share the experiences of transgender music teachers, other than myself. I wanted to connect with people who struggled through similar instances of feeling invisible and I wanted to create more than just a researcher/participant relationship with Iroh, Michaela, and Lily. Connections were easy but determining which conversations were going to make the final research text and what they meant for the study was a challenge that I did not feel prepared to tackle. Similar to the writing and rewriting of my story (Chapter 1), I treated each person’s chapter with the same amount of care, paying close attention to the voice that was being heard throughout.

At times, I felt overwhelmed by many facets of this study. Not only did I have to relive my past traumas through the many iterations of chapter one, but I also had to navigate through my biases and triggers as Iroh, Michaela, and Lily recounted their experiences. In the many rounds of reading observation notes, dialogue transcripts, and sorting through Facebook and text messages, I found multiple directions I could go in this project. I spent time considering which themes I should develop and worked to make connections to music education throughout the final portion of this study.

As I mused over the seemingly infinite amount of data, I fought with myself, trying to find THE answer for writing this chapter. Instead of putting pen to paper, or fingertips to the keyboard, I sat, struggling to know where or even how to begin. “The analysis chapter will write itself,” the wise ones who went before me kept saying, but it didn’t. Then I remembered a quote that I read at the beginning of my journey as a PhD student, “Rather than hoping to produce ‘the right’ knowledge, or indeed ‘the truth’, narrative researchers realize that there are multiple
possibilities for representing stories” (Fraser, 2004, pp. 195-196). And although this observation did not make me feel any less overwhelmed, it gave me just what I needed to get started.

At the beginning of this study, I asked two research questions that helped shape and inform the narrative analysis that follows:

1. How do transgender music teachers experience visibility and validation with their students, student parents, colleagues, and administration?
2. To what extent does the teacher’s perception of visibility and validity influence their ability to make human connections through music with their students and the larger school community?

The purpose of this study was to seek insight into the music teaching experiences of transgender music teachers and understand the importance of human connection as it intersected with their perceptions of visibility and validation in the classroom. In this chapter, I will reflect on the experiences that Iroh, Michaela, and Lily shared, consider the application for music education, and discuss what has yet to be accomplished through their stories.

The three major themes that I will discuss in this chapter are: 1) experiencing visibility, 2) experiencing validation, and 3) exploring how visibility and validation impacted these transgender teachers abilities to make human connections with their students in music learning.

**Experiencing Visibility**

In beginning of this study, I was concerned about whether my presence in their classrooms would make Iroh, Michaela, and Lily feel as if they were the object of study. I wanted to “remain attentive to what [the] participants said rather than treat them and what they said solely as objects of analysis” (Francis & Monakali, 2021, p. 722). I also knew as both researcher and an insider to the trans community I dispelled, through increased visibility, the
notion that the trans person “is to be seen only as the object of curiosity” (Veale, 2017, p. 121), and I offered the participants a “sense of empowerment in enhancing the trans voice as it speaks out about health, education, and research” (p. 122).

Iroh and Lily confirmed the sense of empowerment in reading the first drafts of their chapters. They both ensured that there was limited, if any, objectification through the reading of their conversations. They both felt that their voices were heard and that the sense of visibility through the narratives was compelling and that other trans music teachers would find themselves throughout the text. Michaela never mentioned anything about her document.

Schools, and the larger part of society in general, “understand gender in distinctly dichotomous and heterosexual terms” (Wells, 2018, p. 1547). The strict affinity for the alignment of biological sex and gender identity can render these three transgender teachers invisible to their colleagues, students, and their larger social worlds. I observed, and Iroh, Michaela, and Lily shared, the ways that their trans identities were visible in their classrooms, schools, and to some extent, their communities. Their stories provided insight into the positive (euphoric) and negative (dysphoric) aspects of trans visibility.

**Euphoric Visibility through Daily and Performance Attire.** Many music teachers, transgender or otherwise, experience a sense of self-expression through their daily attire. For Lily, her sense transgender identity was visible through her everyday attire. Her young first grade students would frequently comment on her appearance on the occasion when she wore a dress to school. She enjoyed the validation that came from their comments and found that to be helpful in making her feel like less of a fraud and more of a woman.

For music teachers, imposter syndrome can sometimes manifest itself as feeling as if they are not “real musicians”, or even frauds (Bhachu, 2016, p. 43). For Lily, this feeling of being a
fraud is compounded because of the added identity of “other” to the selves that are musician teacher. Lily noted that when young students “look[ed] up to [her] for fashion” it took away that feeling of being a fraud, made her transgender identity visible to her students, and validated her gender as a woman.

For Michaela, her feelings of euphoria through daily attire happened outside of school. At school, she had a more feminine way of presenting but at home, she could take it off and not worry about presenting in a certain way. She could live in her femininity without feeling as if she needed to wear feminine attire to be taken seriously as a trans femme person.

Attire, more specifically concert attire, is one way that transgender music teachers experience euphoric visibility. In their most public display of visibility, transgender music teachers vulnerably navigate the cisgender-dominant world of daily attire and concert performance. When a music teacher dresses for a performance, they are heightening their visibility as a teacher, musician, conductor, and in the case of Iroh, Michaela, and Lily, as transpersons on the podium.

Society has common “unspoken rules” about the way one should dress according to their assigned gender (Akdemir, 2018, p. 260). In music performance, these unspoken expectations frequently mean that traditional concert attire consists of tuxedos and dresses for the people on stage. While Iroh honored a more traditional approach by offering the more binary visual representation of pants and skirts, Michaela encouraged students to dress in what they had available. She shared, “I always dressed up, but the kids, as long as they showed up for the concert, I didn’t really care what they were wearing.”

When their ensembles are performing, Iroh, Michaela, and Lily are an essential part of that performance and this study has brought to light the complexity that these three public-
facing, transgender music teachers experience when it comes to topics of dress. For school concerts, Iroh wears a black suit with a teal shirt. Depending on the concert, Michaela sometimes wears black slacks with a white shirt and a tie and occasionally she adds a pair of heels to her concert attire. Lily wears a dress and flats when her students have music performances.

For some trans-masculine people, top surgery can lead to a stronger sense of confidence in expressing and honoring their trans identity. For Iroh, this post-top surgery confidence made them feel much more visible in their concert suit. “Wearing my suit now makes me feel so much more visible (and maybe even validates my trans identity) because my body fits into it the way I want it to now.”

The complexity of concert attire for the trans student in the music ensemble has been addressed by many (Aguirre, 2018; Miller, 2016; Palkki, 2016; Silveira, 2019; Sims, 2017), but the consideration of concert attire for the transgender teacher has had much less stage time. Cayari, et. al., (2021) expressed the need for offering students neutral options through “Clothing that is considered gender free (e.g., polo shirts with jeans, all-black clothes, or school-provided uniforms that honor binary and nonbinary genders) [to] provide options that are both cisgender- and transgender-friendly” (p. 54).

Instead of labeling attire options as male/female, Iroh provides two options: Option 1 consisted of the QLA teal polo, black pants, black dress shoes, black socks. Option 2 was the QLA teal polo, black skirt, black dress shoes, and black socks/tights/hose. Iroh would frequently field questions from AMAB students about choosing the skirt. And though they have not had an AMAB student wear attire Option 2, they would welcome it with open arms.

**Dysphoric Visibility through Daily and Performance Attire.** Transgender people face a “lifetime of repeated victimization” (Stotzer, 2009, p. 171). Michaela’s apprehension about
public presentation extended into her daily life at school. In leaving her classroom, Michaela always wore a mask, a protective tactic she had continued despite the ebbing of the COVID-19 pandemic. She felt as though her mask would take the focus off of her trans identity and instead people would see her as a feminine person instead of “man in a dress”.

In the context of her school, she was more careful with her public presentation during performances. Instead of wearing her everyday attire that accentuated a feminine presentation, she defaulted to attire that moved her from one end of the gender binary to the other. Although she felt safe in her classroom wearing a more feminine style of clothing, the public setting made her apprehensive to bring her transness to the foreground.

**Dysphoric Visibility through Vocal Modeling.** At the initial stages of this study, I had limited my focus to choral music teachers because of the traditional labeling of voices; high voices belong to women and low voices belong to men. (In chapter 3 I discussed why I reevaluated this limitation.) Even as I broadened who could participate in the study, I also discovered that no matter the music teaching specialty, a trans music teacher’s speaking and singing voice can be a site of dysphoric visibility.

Based on my own experiences, I had assumed that vocal modeling might cause each of the participants a certain level of dysphoria. For me, I was almost able to dissociate from being seen as *her* when I modeled for my students, but at the time, I still very much appeared to be *her*. It didn’t necessarily cause me dysphoria because I didn’t really think about it back then, but as I have grown more comfortable in my physical body, my vocal modeling, while still beautiful, sometimes causes a discomfort that I did not anticipate.
Iroh described that they felt so much more open when they sang and that provided them with a sense of euphoria. But when they thought about the connection between their physical appearance and their vocal modeling, they noted that they are commonly perceived as a woman because of the high quality of their speaking voice. I wondered what modeling for the sopranos and altos in their ensemble made them feel. There were a couple of trans altos in their choir and they mentioned that they had no trouble modeling for the altos. When it came time to model for the sopranos Iroh felt as though they could visualize themselves as the teacher, dissociating from their trans identity for the good of the students.

While Iroh’s higher voice initially caused them dysphoria, their ability to “just be the music teacher” mitigated their sense of dysphoria. They continued to work in front of their students despite any momentary discomfort. The further Iroh went in their transition, the more visible their trans identity became and the displacement of the dysphoria with euphoria as they navigated their changing voice right in front of their students.

During my time with Michaela, we talked frequently about the relationship that she had with her voice. She spent many of her younger years forcing her voice to be lower to avoid being heard as feminine. When we talked about vocal modeling for her choir students, she, like Iroh, did not think about it in the moment. Since Michaela would model an octave below the treble voices, she would frequently have those students sing in a circle, so they had a more accurate representation of their voice part. Outside the classroom, Michaela would actively silence herself for fear of being seen as transgender. Michaela spent her younger years forcing her voice to be lower to avoid being bullied for having a girly voice. Her fear of transphobia outside her classroom led her to speak as little as possible to avoid, physical or verbal violence. In public
presentations of student work, like concerts, she would revert to old habits of lowering her voice, or have students do the speaking.

Lily mentioned that her voice often led to dysphoria because of the ways in which her students perceived her when she spoke or sang. Many of her younger students would say things like, “how come you look like a girl, but you sound like a boy?” Lily fielded questions like that often and each time she decided whether to educate or simply stop the student’s comment and continue with her lesson.

**Summary: Experiencing Visibility.** For these three transgender music teachers their visibility as trans people led to feelings of both euphoria and dysphoria. Iroh felt euphoria through their public presentation in their concert suit. Michaela experienced euphoria through her daily attire and Lily felt euphoria through the young students’ validation of her dresses. The dysphoria felt by each person was similar through the pitch and timbre of their speaking voice.

Nadine Hubbs (2010) described visibility as a desire to move from the background to the foreground. Hubbs offered that the positives of visibility are: “recognition, validation, access, and weakening the grip of heteronormativity, which would insist that the only real lives and stories are heterosexual ones, that indeed, heterosexuality constitutes the natural order of things” (2010). But Hubbs also reminded the audience that with visibility comes the possibility of unwanted attention: “But visibility can also have negative ramifications, including the risks of homophobic targeting that come with queer visibility” (2010). In the next section I will examine the validation that these teachers experienced with their students, colleagues, peers, and others as a result of their trans visibility.
Experiencing Validation

Music teachers experience professional validation in a number of ways: positive adjudication of their ensembles in festivals and competitions, seeing their students master a difficult technique or sing a complex new work with confidence, or when colleagues acknowledge their role in creating transformative student experiences. But when the music teacher is also trans, they seek validation not only through the musical abilities and successes of their students, but also to just be seen as a professional, a musician, and as a human being. I never thought that the very nature of this project would be something that validated the participants’ trans identity, but in this section, I examine the power of validation to support the humanity of the trans music teacher. Iroh, Michaela and Lily described how their workplaces, through policies and practices, and peers, supported their trans identities and validated them as both teachers and human beings.

A Validating Workplace. School policies are one tool for creating a school environment that validates the transpersons, student and teacher, who inhabit it. Farley and Leonardi (2021) stated that, “…policies communicate that the school or district at least understands that transgender and gender expansive students need support, even when they are not able to do that well” (p. 291). In Michaela’s school, the policies in place did not necessarily reflect protections for the trans teacher. However, in guidelines for transgender students in her district, she felt confident in being visible through the validation of the existing school policy that supported the protections for trans students. The guidelines listed a goal to:

... create an environment in which all students are able to identify and express their gender and achieve healthy development including social, emotional, and academic
success. This approach includes schools affirming students’ gender identities and being flexible during gender transition processes (p. 1)\(^{19}\)

The forced social labeling, or genderism (Bilodeau, 2013, p. 75) of the bathroom environment is something that Michaela and her trans students navigated daily. Michaela shared that she feels confident in using the bathroom that aligns with her identity at school because of the school policies. She opted to use the women’s bathroom which happened to be on the same floor as her classroom. Students who needed to use the neutral bathroom not only had to climb the many concrete stairs to get to the first floor, but they also needed to retrieve a key, drop their student ID with the office staff, return the key and get their ID in order to relieve themselves. While the school policies at JESC were willing to affirm students’ and teachers’ identities, the infrastructure is weak. The inability to provide simple access to a neutral bathroom without all the hoops left some trans students vulnerable to the possibility of having to use a gendered bathroom out of ease. The written support of the school policy did not always translate into the lived experiences of the transgender students and teachers in this school environment.

In addition to school policy, school administrators and colleagues can also provide validation to their trans students and teachers. Since this study focused on the trans teacher, I will discuss the ways that Iroh and Lily both felt supported and validated by their administration. At QLA, Iroh’s principal as well as school district’s Director Civil Rights, focused on the fluid state of their school policies to ensure equity. Principal Rick believed that no one should ever feel bad for who they are. He joked about some faculty writing on staff surveys that they spend more time making sure they are all “good people” and spend less time on other issues. He took that

\(^{19}\) Further exploration of these guidelines can be found in Appendix I
comment as a compliment which made it clear that transgender students and teachers had the support they needed to feel visible and valid.

Iroh also felt a sense of validation through their presence as a trans music teacher at QLA. They found growth in being the “elder” for queer youth. They later described feelings of validation through explaining what it felt like to see themselves in their trans students. With that feeling of validation came a curiosity about how different their life would have been if they knew transgender people when they were growing up.

**Girl’s Night Out.** Lily experienced validation during after school social gatherings, which consisted mostly of cis women and their children, the occasional husband would show up. The community of women had embraced Lily as one of the girls. These girls’ nights were a frequent occurrence for them and a time when they could gossip and connect with each other outside of the classroom. She loved these interactions and her connections with Jess helped Lily to feel like one of the girls, but she also felt like something was missing. She was grateful for her friend group and that they accepted her as one of the girls, but none of them were trans. She yearned for connections with people who were also trans and found that through this project which validated both her visibility as trans and that her friend group could still be supportive even if they did not fully understand some of her experiences.

**Validating Trans Students.** Transgender music teachers can create a classroom atmosphere of understanding and acceptance for both trans and non-trans music students. The visibility of Iroh, Michaela, and Lily helped their trans or gender nonconforming youth to see someone who is successful AND trans. In their 2021 book, *Honoring Trans and Gender-Expansive Students in Music Education*, Garrett and Palkki discuss the obstacles that some trans singers face because of rehearsal language in the choral setting. One of the participants in Garrett
and Palkki’s (2021) work encourages choral music teachers to consider voice parts as instruments, referring to sections by voice part instead of by gender. This person uses the term degendering to describe this process and says, “we can psychologically rewire ourselves, for example, by addressing ‘sopranos and altos’ rather than addressing ‘girls or ladies’” (p. 181).

Each of the three participants primarily used neutral language in all of their classes by employing the terms folks and people to validate each of their students, with the minor exception of Lily’s use of boys/girls in one of her classes.

At the start of their time at QLA, Iroh’s students did not validate their trans identity. Some of their students saw Iroh, as Wells (2018) described “within the shadows of (un) intelligibility” (1544). Having limited opportunities to interact with a trans adult, the student wrestled with their perceptions of Iroh until they were finally able to see them as someone recognizable. It wasn’t that Iroh’s transgender identity was invisible, quite the opposite. It was simply unrecognizable to this student and instead of shouldering the student’s inability to see them as human, Iroh instead remained true to their identity, creating a space for the student to come to that realization on their own.

In one of our final conversations, Iroh referenced a conversation that they had with their dad in which their dad told them it was okay to be a trans teacher but that there was no reason that students should know about their identity. Iroh argued with him and reminded him that it was essential that their students also knew that they were trans. They said to their dad, “If you never saw an adult that looked like you then you would think that people like you never made it into adulthood.” In realizing and honoring their identity in the classroom, Iroh knew the importance of representation.
For Michaela, her trans identity helped to shape her to be a “better” teacher. Her struggles as a queer, trans teacher made her interested in the ways she could support her students who might have similar experiences. She wanted to provide students with a positive representation of trans people in the classroom. Michaela wanted to change the narrative about trans persons in the classroom and to do that, she thanked her ability to make connections with her students, which validated her position as a trans music teacher.

**Summary: Experiencing Validation.** The transgender music teachers in this study experienced validation in a variety of ways. They experienced validation through the careful attention to school policies, which still need some work to be specific to the trans teachers, and through support from administrators and colleagues in the face of adversity. They also experienced validation as they owned their roles as trans people in their classrooms, noting the importance of representation for their LGBTQ+ students.

**Honoring These Conversations**

The following subsections exist to discuss future topics for research. Additionally, it will explore the impact of vulnerability for trans music teachers and the ways in which their ability to be vulnerable aided in visibility and validation.

**Unique Contexts of School.** In selecting narrative inquiry to collect conversations with Iroh, Michaela, and Lily, the most important part of the study was my ability to be in their school environments. It was essential that I travel to their locations not only to be able to provide physical context, but to ask the question, what is it about this setting that allowed these three teachers to feel safe to honor their trans identities, heightening their visibility by participating in this research study? I don’t know that I’ll answer that question here, but I do think that each school context provided differing levels of safety, thus chances for visibility, for the participants.
Iroh worked in a school environment where possibly too much time was spent on ensuring the faculty and staff were “good people”, honoring the identity of all in the building. Lily’s school was going through a reaccreditation at the time of my visit so I was unable to meet with the head of school, but I am told that she often meets with Lily to talk about safety for trans students. Being in an urban setting, Michaela had to employ “a specialized set of skills that differs from the skills necessary to succeed in non-urban contexts” (Fitzpatrick, 2011, p. 234). This meant that sometimes, her trans identity was unimportant as she was dealing with students literally burning condoms in the back of the classroom. There is one question that remains:

- How can these spaces inform other schools where transgender music teachers may have to be less than visible?

**Active Negotiation of Trans Identity.** Iroh, Michaela, Lily may have been transgender music teachers, but they often spoke of spaces where their transness was irrelevant. Lily shared that when she was teaching her new strings students, she could focus on nothing more than teaching strings. She reminded me of advice that she received about paying close attention to the power that trans people give to their transition, stating, “when you’re transitioning… you’re working on so many things… but when you’ve finished your transition, then what? You’re lost. Your transition becomes your identity…”

The process of transitioning is unique to every person and for Lily, she knew that her transness was just one part of her identity as a human being. She felt seen and valid in her teaching environment that she wasn’t constantly concerned about how students perceived her. She could teach her students and be a positive role model for them and her transness was only one piece to her puzzle. She did, however, wonder what support she would have if she didn’t
begin the job at TCS as Lily. For example, if she took the job pre-transition, one question for further research pertains to this:

- What would this study look like if the participants worked at their school prior to honoring their transgender identity?

**Understanding the Importance of Human Connection**

The biggest finding from this study showed me that when Iroh, Michaela, and Lily felt seen as human beings, that human connections with their students were possible. Expanding notions of what it means to be a human being requires a questioning and challenging of traditional beliefs and understandings of the “many ways there are to be a human being” (Feinberg, 1998, p. 5). And since humanity is often shaped by the social environment, it was important to Iroh, Michaela, and Lily that they made positive human connections with the people with whom they worked.

In addition to understanding the importance of human connections was the ever-present question, what does this have to do with music teachers? And the fact of the matter was, the issues that arose for each participant were not unique to music teachers, but that doesn’t make it any less pertinent to the teachers of this study. One consideration, however, was if music teachers, or teachers of the arts in general, were more able to express their transgender identities than in other spaces. Another lingering question from this study may be,

- Was there more opportunity for teachers in the arts to experience or express vulnerabilities than in other fields of study, thus providing space for transgender identities to be visible?

**Vulnerability, Visibility, and Validation.** Vulnerability is an essential element in the lives of music teachers. Through this study, participants felt safe to engage a “sense of
vulnerability” (Hendricks, 2018, p. 49), which Wiggins (2011) defined as being “open and sensitive – to the music itself…and perspectives of fellow music makers”, in this case students (p. 358). Although Wiggins did not explicitly make connections to the work of transgender music teachers, she laid bare the interaction between vulnerability and agency in both becoming a musician and becoming a music teacher (p. 356). According to Wiggins, the way to reach visibility is to first experience vulnerability and take risks, both musically and personally. But what happens when that vulnerability is met with friction?

We are willing to be vulnerable when our vulnerability is embraced with acceptance.

There is a layer of the unexpected when the vulnerability is met with betrayal.

Vulnerability that results in wounding generates a resistance, a protective layer that makes us less willing to be vulnerable the next time” (Wiggins, 2011, p. 364)

Transgender music teachers are vulnerable in multiple ways. As Wiggins explained, there is vulnerability in being “a musical decision maker and making one’s musical ideas or interpretations public” (p. 358). Transgender music teachers make musical decisions that are scrutinized by the parents, administration, and the public, scrutiny that maybe harsher, more judgmental than that made of non-trans music teachers. Additionally, there is a public element of being a music teacher and transgender (and cisgender) music teachers alike are called upon to vulnerably engage with students in ways that address the human condition, love, violence, joy, historical contexts, etc.

Iroh vulnerably existed in their college band program as trans but was met with betrayal by the graduate assistant. The GA found out Iroh’s deadname and used it in front of others, causing a great deal of pain for Iroh. When they spoke of this instance, they said it was “horribly
uncomfy”. Their friends encouraged them to file a lawsuit against the grad student, but Iroh’s mental health at the time was not prepared to expose themselves further.

Lily on the other hand had a different experience with vulnerability. Lily decided in her second year to share her story of becoming Lily. She developed a presentation in two parts to share concepts general to the LGBTQ community and then the second part was her story. Lily’s vulnerability in sharing her story in her second year at TCS aided in giving her non-trans colleagues insight into some of the struggles and triumphs that she has had as a transgender music teacher. She actively engaged her colleagues and students, making visible her gender identity through this presentation.

At some point during the data collection process, each participant asked me how visibility and validation were different. “These two elements seem the same.” They would say. As I contemplated this, I wondered, was there a way for transgender music teachers to experience visibility without validation, and would that translate to music vulnerability? I argue that in order for transgender teachers to vulnerably make human connections with their students and colleagues, through music teaching or not, they must first experience visibility and validation. I saw this process of visibility, validation, and vulnerability as a cycle in the image below.

![Figure 10 The Cycle of Visibility and Validation](image.png)
If the trans music teacher felt visible as transgender and that identity was validated by all in their classroom/school environment, then they could experience vulnerability to connect with themselves and their students.

**Closing.** Currently, conservative politicians the United States are attempting to consolidate power by attacking trans people and passing laws that would disappear us from common spaces and deny us the common good. I hope that my conversations with Iroh, Michaela, and Lily have rendered them visible and that their voices will linger long past the close of this study. May the vulnerability they offered provide representation and validation for other transgender music teachers and illuminate the path forward past their feelings of being a freak or a fraud and towards genuine, human connections with their students.

In music education, scholars are only just beginning to consider the experiences and insights of transgender teachers. The stories shared by Iroh, Michaela, and Lily are but a few pieces in the research puzzle of the intersections of trans and teacher identity. To conclude, I leave the last words to Lily:

*We can still hold space to think about ourselves but at the end of the day, we’re still music teachers, we can still make music. That’s the goal. That’s what we want to do.*
REFERENCES


Yin, R. K. 2010. *Qualitative research from start to finish*. Guilford Press

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

Notice of Exempt Determination

June 30, 2022

Principal Investigator: Bridget Sweet
CC: Miranda Rowland; Jeananne Nichols
Protocol Title: Freak and Fraud: Exploring Notions of Visibility and Validation for Gender Expensive Choral Music Teachers
Protocol Number: 23149
Funding Source: Unfunded
Review Category: Exempt 2 (ii)
Determination Date: June 29, 2022
Expiration Date: June 28, 2027

This letter authorizes the use of human subjects in the above protocol. The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) has reviewed your application and determined the criteria for exemption have been met.

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.
- Requesting approval from the IRB prior to implementing major 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.

Changes to an exempt protocol are only required if substantive modifications are requested and/or the changes requested may affect the exempt status.
APPENDIX B: SOCIAL MEDIA USED FOR RECRUITMENT

The following are social media groups that I participate in on Facebook and show promise for locating potential participants:

(Trans)Position is a private group that describes itself as inclusive for all trans educators in the field of music education. This group

“strive[s] to shape the field of music education into one that equitably values all marginalized and notably underrepresented voices, especially Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC). We are building our own table; we are writing our own song.”

LGBTQ+ Teachers is a private group whose purpose is for LGBTQ+ teachers to share stories and connect with each other. This community of teachers

“lift up and give attention to the issues relating to our most marginalized and vulnerable members, i.e. People of Color, Trans People, Femme People, HIV+ people, Youth, Immigrants, etc. Don’t just check your privilege, leverage your privilege in order to support and elevate those that don’t have it.”

Trans, Intersex, Non-binary School Professionals Support Group is a private group that caters to transpersons only. This community of teachers is able to pose questions regarding administrative support upon coming out and/or ways of engaging their students in conversations about gender identity and presentation in their classrooms.

The Nonbinary Agenda is a private group, which is not specific to education, but there have been topics of conversation surrounding the gender identity of teachers.
Social Behavioral Research Consent Form

Freak and Fraud: Exploring Notions of Visibility and Validation for Gender Expansive Choral Music Teachers

You are being asked to participate in a voluntary research study. The purpose of this study is to seek insight into the music teaching experiences and teaching practices of gender expansive music educators. Participating in this study will involve participating in a minimum of three semi-structured interviews, the keeping of a research journal and your participation will last over the course of an academic semester. Discomforts related to this research include potentially revealing difficulties that you may have faced as a gender expansive choral music teacher, and the considerable time commitment of contributing to this study may at times be a struggle. Benefits related to this research include providing insight into the plight faced by gender expansive choral music teachers as it pertains to the binary structures of schooling in which many cisgender teachers have no knowledge. As this study will be among the first to address the experiences of transgender and gender expansive music teachers, I hope it will serve as a foundational study for further scholarship.

Principal Investigator Name and Title: Dr. Bridget Sweet
Department and Institution: Music, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Contact Information: bsweet@illinois.edu

Why am I being asked?
You are being asked to be a participant in a research study about perceptions of visibility and validation for gender expansive choral music educators. The purpose of this research is to gather insight from a small number of participants, into the teaching experiences and teaching practices of gender expansive choral music educators. You have been asked to participate in this research because you are uniquely positioned as a gender expansive choral music teacher who is ‘out’ to their school community. Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

What procedures are involved?
The study procedures consist of three semi-structured interviews, maintaining a research journal throughout the duration of the study, and a minimum of two in-person (or Zoom) classroom observations to provide context of your teaching environment. The location of the interviews depends on the participants’ location. If possible, in-person interviews will occur; otherwise, Zoom will be used for convenience.

With the exception of my commute to your school environment, this research will be performed primarily remotely. Unless in-person interviews are an option, you will not need to visit a research site. We will meet a minimum of 3 times over the course of the academic semester. Interviews will last at least 90 minutes and observations will consist of a full school day.

Will my study-related information be kept confidential?
When studies seek to include the stories of a small number of participants, de-identification is much more difficult, but we will use all reasonable efforts to keep your personal information confidential, but
cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. When this research is discussed or published, no one will know that you were in the study. But, when required by law or university policy, identifying information (including your signed consent form) may be seen or copied by: a) The Institutional Review Board that approves research studies; b) The Office for Protection of Research Subjects and other university departments that oversee human subjects research; c) University and state auditors responsible for oversight of research.

Will I be reimbursed for any expenses or paid for my participation in this research?
You will not be offered payment for being in this study.

Can I withdraw or be removed from the study?
If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time. The researchers also have the right to stop your participation in this study without your consent if they believe it is in your best interests, you were to object to any future changes that may be made in the study plan, and/or if your participation in this study has begun to cause obvious signs of distress.

Will data collected from me be used for any other research?
Your de-identified information could be used for future research without additional informed consent.

Who should I contact if I have questions?
Contact the researchers Mr. Rowland at 217-433-4478 or mmrs@illinois.edu or Dr. Bridget Sweet, bsweet@illinois.edu, if you have any questions about this study or your part in it, or if you have concerns or complaints about the research.

What are my rights as a research subject?
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at 217-333-2670 or irb@illinois.edu.

I have read the above information. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research. I will be given a copy of this signed and dated form.

__________________________  _______________________
Signature                      Date

__________________________
Printed Name

__________________________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent  Date (must be same as subject's)

__________________________
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

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Dear Miranda Rowland,

We greatly appreciate your interest in becoming a Chicago Public School Volunteer at JESC. Please be advised that you have been approved as a Level II Volunteer. Please contact the school's Volunteer Coordinator to begin volunteering. In addition, please refer to the list below for the approved Level II Activities.

Approved Level II Activities:

1. A parent providing supervised volunteer service in their child's school or classroom for less than 10 hours/week;
2. Any individual providing volunteer service for less than 5 hours/week at a school where s/he does not have a child enrolled;
3. An individual providing incidental volunteer service with no ongoing individualized interaction with a student(s), including those who speak at a class/assembly, judge academic competitions, live musical performance, participate in the "Principal for a Day" program, job shadowing event or other one-time event provided where there is direct supervision of the activity/event by regular school employees;
4. A parent accompanying his/her child's class on a one-day field trip or another type of Extracurricular activity that does not involve an overnight stay;
5. An individual providing volunteer service on projects/activities involving no or nominal contact with children (home-based volunteer activities, volunteers serving at Central or Network office).

Volunteer Clearance Expiration Date: June 30th, 2023

Your continued support and commitment to our students are greatly appreciated. For questions or more information, please contact the Volunteer Programs staff at Volunteer cleared or [email protected]
APPENDIX E: PARENT LETTER

Dear Parent,

My name is M.R. Rowland, a doctoral candidate in Music Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. My research director, Professor Bridget Sweet, and I are currently undertaking a research project that involves observing your child’s music teacher, [insert name of teacher] as they lead rehearsal. We are specifically interested in understanding the context in which [teacher’s name] teaches and observing their interactions with students during the rehearsal process. I am sending this letter to you to make you aware of my presence in the classroom. The primary focus of these observations will be on [teacher’s name] and the way they move through their day as a choral music teacher. This study is not focused on the student, and your child is not a direct participant in this study. However, conversations between [teacher’s name] and the student might be discussed within the context of the observation. This communication will be described in a general way but no descriptors, such as names or other direct identifiers, will be described. I look forward to visiting your child’s classes.

Sincerely,

M.R. Rowland
Doctoral Candidate in Music Education
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
mmr6@illinois.edu (217) 493-4478

Dr. Bridget Sweet (Primary Investigator)
Associate Professor of Music Education
bsweet@illinois.edu (517) 449-6960
APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Kim (2015) asks “what types of questions should we ask to elicit stories” (p. 170)? In this phase of the interview, open-ended language will be used to allow the participant to dictate the direction of the interview. Some examples of questions during this phase of the interview:

- Why have you felt compelled to share your experiences with me?
- How would you describe yourself as a teacher?
- What is the most memorable moment of your ability to connect with your students?
- Tell me about a time when you felt like the most authentic version of yourself in the classroom.
- Tell me when/if you have felt the most visible as a gender expansive choral music teacher.

In addition to the questions in the narration phase of the interview process, the two-sentence format (Morrissey, 1987) will provide supplemental questions as the participant continues to act as narrator. An example of the two-sentence format, which exists as a fabrication at this time:

- You have shared a lot about the challenges of being called ‘Ms.’/ ‘Mr.’ Teacher. Can you talk a little bit more about those challenges and the ways that they have informed your teaching?
APPENDIX G: JOURNAL PROMPTS

As a supplement to the interview process, participants will be given four Google Docs that serve as a shared writing space between the participant and myself. Found below are the names of the four Google Docs and the content likely to be found in each:

**Document 1: Initial Journal Prompt**

Prior to the interview, participants will be asked to share informal thoughts on the following prompt:

What role, if any, does my gender identity play in the formation of my teacher identity? Tell me a story of a time when you noticed that your gender identity played a role in who you are as both a choral musician and choral music educator.

**Document 2: Random Writing**

This space is reserved for informal dialogue between participant and researcher. There is no specific prompt for any part of this writing space. This is also a space where participants can pose questions or concerns or any other forms of communication that may take place between previously scheduled interviews.

**Document 3: Micro-Moment Memories**

In this space participants will find 3 sample prompts. They will be asked to reflect on at least one of the prompts listed below:

**Micro-moment of doubt.** This reflection could detail the ways participants’ views of themselves as their teacher identity intersects with their gender identity. Imposter syndrome may also find its way into this post.

**Micro-moment of misgendering.** Although not a micro issue for the gender expansive teacher, this topic could explore the ways cisgender colleagues support gender expansive
teachers. This could also explore power dynamics in play between cisgender teachers and the Other.

**Micro-moment of activism.** Stemming from either celebration or direct experiences of oppression, this reflection could detail the ways in which the gender expansive teacher steps out of the music classroom to assist with school GSAs (Gay Straight Alliances) or steps they may have taken to assist gender expansive students in their care.

**Document 4: Final Journal Prompt**

In this document, participants will respond to the prompt that follows. This journal serves as a precursor to the final interview.

Has my concept of visibility as a gender expansive teacher changed? If so, how has it changed? Tell me about a day, if applicable, that stands out to you as a turning point for you to acknowledge the intersection of your gender and teacher identities.
APPENDIX H: GENDER SUPPORT PLAN AT QLA

Date

Student Legal Name

Gender on Birth Certificate

Gender Identity that Student self-relates to

Names, Pronouns, and Student Records
  - Name (Nickname) to be entered into the student information system
  - Name to be used when referring to the student
  - Pronouns

Use of Facilities
  - Student will use the following restroom on campus
  - Student will change clothes in the following place

Extra-Curricular Activities
  - After school activities/sports the student participates in
  - Facilities available for the student during these activities
  - Coach/Staff sponsor of activity date notified

Additional comments:
APPENDIX I: GENDER SUPPORT GUIDELINES AT JESC

GENDER SUPPORT PLAN FOR TRANSGENDER, NONBINARY OR GENDER NONCONFORMING STUDENTS

CONFIDENTIAL

School: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Name: ___________________________ Pronouns: ___________________________

Legal Name: ___________________________

Gender: _____ Sex Listed on Birth Certificate: _____ Date of Birth: __________

Grade Level: __________ Is a Name Change in Requested?* __ Yes ____ No

Is a Gender Change in Requested?* __ Yes ____ No

Sibling(s)/Grade(s)/School(s): ___________________________

*Please see "Including Student Goes By Name and Gender in 'N'" included in this toolkit, for step-by-step instructions on entering changes in 'N'.

PRIVACY

Per the CDC Guidelines Regarding the Support of Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students (Guidelines), all students have a right to privacy. This includes the right to keep private their transgender status or gender nonconforming presentation at school. Students have the right to openly discuss and express their gender-related identity and expression at school and school activities, and to decide when, with whom, and how to share private information.

School staff shall not disclose information that may reveal a student's transgender status or gender nonconforming presentation to others. Therefore, given the sensitive nature of the information, when speaking with parents, guardians, other staff members, or third parties, school staff should not disclose a student's preferred name, pronoun, or other confidential information pertaining to the student's transgender or gender nonconforming status without the student's permission, unless authorized to do so by the Chicago Board of Education's Law Department.

PARENT/GUARDIAN INVOLVEMENT

School shall not disclose a student's transgender, nonbinary or gender nonconforming status to parents/guardians without the student’s permission, unless authorized to do so by the Law Department.