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Exploring Caregivers' Perceptions of Their Trans Children's Elementary School Experiences

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Abstract

A growing body of research reflects the ways in which trans students, who do not adhere to society's rigid gender binary in practices, policies, and/or norms (Kosciw et. al., 2020; Luecke, 2011; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014), are ill-served by the current social climates in the majority of our nation's public schools. Trans students are at a disproportionate risk for harassment, low academic achievement, and school dropout (Payne & Smith, 2018), and transgender individuals experience disparate rates of serious mental health concerns including depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Austin, 2022). Additionally, amid a wave of anti-trans legislation in the United States, the situation for many trans students gets worse by the day (Martino, 2022).

Given the dearth of literature on this topic, the purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand caregivers' perceptions of their trans children's experiences in elementary schools in order to deepen educational professionals' understandings about *why* they need to make schools gender inclusive and *how* they might make it happen. Qualitative research methods were utilized to generate data to answer two research questions. Semi-structured interviews were employed to learn more about caregivers' attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and perceptions.

The data collected in this study showed that, in order for trans students to experience a sense of belonging, schools must offer immediate support to them that considers the following: (a) The Institutional Environment, (b) Classroom Practices, (c) Gender Policing, (d) The Role of Supportive People in the School Community, (e) The Effects of Formal Policies, (f) Professional Development for Teachers, (g) A Position of Responsibility and Vulnerability, (h) Resistance to Diverse Gender Identities, and (i) The Effects of the Political Landscape on Trans Students' Rights.

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

> When those who have power to name and socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you, whether you are dark-skinned, old, disabled, female, or speak with a different accent or dialect than yours, 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 into a mirror and saw nothing.
>
> —Adrienne Rich (1986, p. 119)

Schools today are more likely than ever to enroll trans students. While there is no conclusive data for children under the age of 13, 0.7% of teenagers ages 13-17, or approximately 150,000 youth, identify as trans (Herman et. al., 2017). Therefore, schools with more than 143 children are almost certain to have at least one trans child. These students may openly identify as trans, or they may be nondisclosed, preferring not to share their gender identity (Mangin, 2020). For the purpose of this study *trans* refers to the "spectrum of individuals whose gender identities do not align with cisnormative expectations for the gender assigned to them at birth, or the expectations associated with that gender" (Stryker, 2008), and includes both the terms *binary* and *nonbinary trans*. Stryker (2008) defines *binary trans* as a trans person with a binary identity (i.e., "man" or "woman") and *nonbinary trans* as an individual who identifies as an alternative gender that lies outside the gender binary altogether (i.e., "gender expansive," "gender fluid," and "genderqueer). The idea that children can be transgender often surprises cisgender adults who wonder how children can know their gender. However, developmental psychologists agree that children's core gender identity develops by the age of three (Martin & Ruble, 2010), a fact that is rarely questioned in cisgender children.

The research in this area has largely focused on the experiences of college students and/or trans adults, with very little attention having been paid to younger trans people. This is of

concern, since trans children are disproportionately likely to face harassment in school (Bauer, 2002), and they are the least likely group of students to report that their school communities are safe places (Kosciw et al., 2020). In addition, attitudes toward gender and what is seen as gender-appropriate behavior are formed in early childhood (Brill & Pepper, 2008), and participation in American society requires membership to one of the two gender groups, male and female. An overview of school climate research revealed that limited research currently exists about the experiences and perspectives of trans children, in a sense that the research did not provide a comprehensive overview of the unique needs of trans children in elementary schools.

Despite the scarcity of literature on the trans population in elementary schools, foundational literature does exist. Baldwin (2015) and then Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2017) both categorized caregivers' patterns of experiences with school systems into one of three groups: (1) schools that were inclusive, (2) schools that tried to be inclusive, and (3) schools that were resistant with regard to supporting trans children and their caregivers. Then, Mangin, in her studies (2019, 2020) identified three key characteristics of principals that, when combined, increased principals' capacities to meet trans students' needs. Additionally, she found that teachers were able to create classrooms where trans students experienced affirmation and belonging, which are necessary for engagement and learning. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by bringing back the voices of caregivers of trans children and situating trans students' experiences in elementary schools in the United States within the existing bodies of research to highlight this field as an important emerging area of scholarship for education researchers.

Legal recognition of trans identities and relationships have been gaining momentum, with

protections for trans students being provided under Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 (20 U.S.C. § 1681). At the same time, a growing body of research reflects the ways in which trans students, who do not adhere to society's rigid gender binary in practices, policies, and/or norms (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014), are ill-served by the current social climates in the majority of our nation's public schools. According to a 2020 Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) survey, schools nationwide are hostile environments for trans students, and hostile school climates affect students' academic success and mental health (Kosciw et. al., 2020). Among LGBTQ middle and high school students, 59% felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 37% because of their gender, and 42% because of their gender expression (GLSEN, 2020). Additionally, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) youth face significant disparities in suicide risk compared to their straight and cisgender peers, based largely on the ways they are treated in their broader environment (Johns et al., 2019; Johns et al., 2020; Meyer, 2016).

This study also needs to be contextualized amid a wave of anti-trans legislation and rhetoric in the United States (Martino, 2022). During the 2022 legislative session, 12 states will consider anti-LGBTQIA+ bills aimed at discriminating against LGBTQIA+ youth in schools. These bills target trans people for discrimination by barring or criminalizing healthcare for trans youth, barring access to the use of appropriate facilities like restrooms, restricting trans students' ability to fully participate in school and sports, prohibiting classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels, and prohibiting teachers and others from discussing their gender identities (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022).

It can be argued that the peripheral status, and the subsequent negative implications, of trans students are related to *genderism*, which refers to a rigid adherence to the gender binary (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014) and *cisnormativity*, which Simmons and White (2004) define as the "perpetuation of the false belief that there are only two genders, that gender is immutable, and that bodies define gender, such that people assigned as female at birth will identify as girls/women, and people assigned as male at birth will identify as boys/men" (p. 5). As a result, trans students are, for the most part, expected to attend schools in contexts where all students are presumed to be *boy* or *girl* and heterosexual, and, unfortunately, stories of schools refusing to recognize name and pronoun changes or to disrupt the status-quo of gender-specific dress codes, activities, and facilities are all too common (Smith & Payne, 2016). This current binary system of gender adversely affects trans children, whose preferences and self-expression often fall outside traditionally understood gender norms (Brill & Pepper, 2008). These challenges place trans students at greater risk for harassment and discrimination, and numerous statistics support the level of need trans students require as a result of bullying, harassment, assault, and threats due, in part, to a lack of understanding surrounding their gender identities (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Purpose of the Study

Limited research currently exists about trans children. Most of the research on trans gender identities has focused on the experiences and perspectives of adults, but the increasing visibility of trans children, as they are identified by their caregivers, presents a new opportunity to examine how elementary school environments might affect the safety, engagement, and inclusion of students who challenge the gender binary (Rahilly, 2014). The challenges faced by families of trans children are diverse and complex, but a central feature of their experiences arises in the context of the limitations of the gender binary and the serious societal consequences

for gender transgression (Pyne, 2016). Caregivers of trans children experience an inner struggle as they attempt to affirm and support their children's gender expressions while concurrently trying to maintain their personal safety through censoring and social conformity (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). Caregivers have witnessed their children being harassed and rejected by other children (Payne, 2016), and many have themselves experienced judgment and anger from other caregivers (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017) and disapproval from administrators (Brill & Pepper, 2008).

Legal mandates require schools to take into account the unique needs that some students have in relation to their educational experiences and to provide a safe learning environment for all students that is free from discrimination on the basis of sex and/or sexual orientation (Kaiser, Seitz, & Walters, 2014). As there continues to be a lack of research pertaining to the experiences and perspectives of trans children, this study attempted to better understand trans students' elementary school experiences. The remote research purpose was to identify positive factors of school climates that should be enhanced and negative factors whose effects might be ameliorated in service of reducing the challenges faced by trans youth. To successfully develop the required strategies, more knowledge is needed about the current climates in elementary schools, as they pertain to trans students. Therefore, the immediate goal of this study was to seek input from caregivers about their experiences in the caregiving role of a trans student as they interacted with their children's elementary schools. The caregivers' stories illuminate both the successes and challenges of school environments for trans students. In addition, I examined the perceived availability of resources and supports in school for trans students (e.g., Gay-Straight or Gender and Sexuality Alliances, anti-bullying/harassment and transgender and gender expansive student

policies, supportive school staff, and curricular resources that are inclusive of LGBT+-related topics).

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions of terms is provided:

Genderism – the rigid adherence to the gender binary in practices, policies, and norms (Marine & Nicolasso, 2014).

Cisnormativity – the perpetuation of the false belief that there are only two genders, that gender is immutable, and that bodies define gender, such that people assigned as female at birth will identify as girls/women, and people assigned as male at birth will identify as boys/men (Simmons & White, 2014).

Cisgender (cis) – people with binary gender identities that align with cisnormative expectations for the gender they were assigned at birth (Simmons & White, 2014).

Trans – the spectrum of individuals whose gender identities do not align with cisnormative expectations for the gender assigned to them at birth, or the expectations associated with that gender (Stryker, 2008).

Binary trans – trans persons with binary (i.e. “man” or “woman”) identities (i.e. trans men who were born with female bodies and consider themselves to be men and live socially as men, and trans women who were born with male bodies and consider themselves to be women and live socially as women (Stryker, 2008).

Nonbinary trans – individuals who identify as both man and woman, as an alternative gender that lies outside the gender binary, or who do not have or identify with any gender, including those who identify as agender, gender fluid, and genderqueer (Cruz, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2016a).

LGBTQIA+ – an abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and more. These terms are used to describe a person's sexual orientation or gender identity (GLADD Media Reference Guide, 11th edition).

Research Questions

To gain a better understanding of trans students' elementary school experiences, the present study critically examined the perceptions of caregivers to better understand the ways in which their children's elementary schools were either inclusive or exclusive of trans identities. This phenomenological study asked,

- What are caregiver's perceptions of their trans children's elementary school experiences?
- What do caregivers describe as the supportive and unsupportive characteristics of their children's elementary schools?

Conceptual Framework

Queer pedagogy, which explores the intersection between queer theory and critical pedagogy, served as the primary focus guiding this inquiry (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Critical theory challenges current notions of educational reality, encourages change, identifies those whom can implement change, and serves as a catalyst for social transformation (Kinchelog & McClaren, 2000), while queer theory links gender stereotypes to the norms of heterosexuality and questions the assumption that there is any "normal" expression of gender (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Using the theoretical lens of queer theory directs one's attention to the heterosexual

discourses that are present in early childhood contexts and produce power relations and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, which may impede the academic, social, safety, and educational needs of trans students (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Research methods utilized in the current study promote the opportunity for recognizing the effects of implied or implicit hegemony and consequently move towards change.

The goal of this study was to learn more about the lived experiences of trans students who are attending elementary schools in the United States. Given that this goal sought to gain knowledge about participants' unique, lived experiences, qualitative research was the appropriate lens from which to conduct study. I investigated the perceptions caregivers have regarding their trans children's experiences in elementary schools, and a phenomenological approach was used to study and describe experiences related to a sensitive subject matter (i.e., extent and effects of hostile school climates on trans students) within a vulnerable minority population (trans children).

Research Methods

The study design conformed to Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved procedures for use with human subjects, including informed consent and confidentiality safeguards. Data collection was executed from May through June, 2022. The intention of this research was to gather data regarding the perspectives of research participants (caregivers) about the phenomenon being studied (trans children's experiences in elementary schools).

While there have been some efforts to collect federal data on the experiences of trans youth, most of the information available is focused specifically on health behaviors (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015; Division of Adolescent and School Health [DASH], 2015). Regarding trans children, data specifically related to school environments is

limited, and while GLSEN's National School Climate survey continues to be vitally important to understanding the school experiences of trans students, their biennial survey focuses its attention on the experiences of middle and high school students (Kosciw et al., 2020). This study aimed to fill a void in the research by exploring the experiences of trans children. I was specifically interested in the elementary level because adults often describe children in early grades as being too young to learn about gender, but research has shown that children and adolescents are being bombarded with highly gendered and sexualized messages from the media and the unregulated sources on the Internet, which ensure that children are grappling with sex and gender, whether these issues are addressed in school or not (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). Data also suggest that notions of sex and sexuality infuse everyday social interactions and conversations throughout the school day, even in the lives of elementary-aged children, and even during formal instruction time (Ryan, 2016).

Participants. Participants were recruited through Facebook (Meta), the online social networking site (SNS). "Facebook's size, popularity, and features make it the preferred SNS for constructing a snowball sample in the United States (Bhutta, 2012). Drawing from online networks of support organizations for caregivers of trans students, I utilized snowball sampling to recruit additional participants for the study. According to Cresswell (2013), snowball sampling "identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich" (pg. 158). Additionally, snowball sampling is an approach to participant selection that is especially useful to locate hard-to-access research participants when confidentiality is critical because of the sensitive topic being studied (Patton, 2015). I selected this approach, since I was seeking access to an inner circle of network connections (caregivers of trans children) to document and understand their children's experiences attending elementary

schools. Additionally, I sampled for variation, including participants from different geographical regions to represent a range of legal, political, and educational contexts. To be included in this study, all participants met the following criteria:

Criterion #1: Participants had to be caregivers, 18 years and older, who had parented a trans—having a gender identity that is gender non-binary or transgender—child of 11 years of age or younger within the past five years.

Criterion #2: The trans child must have been currently attending or had previously attended an elementary school in the United States within the past five years.

Criterion #3: Caregivers must have indicated a gender-affirmative parenting stance with respect to their trans child (i.e. a nonjudgmental approach that respects and supports the child's gender identity).

Data collection and analysis. Participants completed a brief (5-10 minute) demographic survey, which included items such as caregiver's gender identity and preferred pronouns, child's gender identity and preferred pronouns, school type (public, public-charter, private-independent, private-religious), and geographic region in which the school is located. Each participant then participated in a semi-structured interview (lasting 45-60 minutes), which was conducted via Zoom (due to the ongoing social restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic). Specific questions were developed drawing on the literature review and Mangin's (2020) case studies of five elementary schools, which demonstrate the successes and challenges of creating affirming school climates for trans students. From these interviews, data was prepared and organized for analysis, then reduced into themes through a process of coding, and identified themes were used to discuss the lived experiences of the participants as a group.

Significance of the Study

Recognizing, challenging, and ultimately transforming heteronormative bias is a vast, but necessary, undertaking. When children do not respond to heteronormative culture in the same way their peers do, they know, from a young age, that something essential about their place in the world is different, and this has a profound impact on their identity development. In this study, I sought to provide a nuanced characterization of trans students' elementary school experiences by eliciting descriptions of positive and negative school factors from their caregivers. A better understanding of these factors may help to identify relevant components of effective school practices for this population. This includes identifying positive factors that should be enhanced and negative factors whose effects might be ameliorated in service of reducing the challenges faced by trans youth.

Conclusion

Schools serve as a setting in which students come to understand gender, but a growing body of research reflects the ways in which trans students, who do not express their gender in accord with societal expectations, are ill-served by the current social climates in the majority of our nation's public schools. Chapter one outlined the importance of examining the experiences of trans elementary school students, since their voices as an oppressed group have remained largely unheard and having a better understanding of positive and negative school factors may help to identify relevant components of effective school practices for this population. Chapter two presents literature related to two fields of study. First, the researcher briefly reviews the literature on the development of trans identities, since having a fundamental understanding of gender development is essential in order to support the growth of trans students at all levels of the education system (Rands, 2009). The term "trans" is discussed in relationship to other concepts that are easily conflated: gender, sex, and sexuality. Second, the researcher reviews the literature

on trans students in schools, discussing schools' legal obligations, available supports, and what is at stake for trans students. Chapter three provides a description of the research plan as well as an overview of the methodology that was used in the present study. Chapter 4 details the results of the study through the use of statistical analysis and also through coding and the identification of themes. Chapter 5 describes the significance of the results, including references to the existing literature. Future research directions, policy implications, and study limitations are also discussed.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Queer Theory

Queer theory is the theoretical framework that situates this literature review, since queer theory insists that heterosexual norms, and not biological instinct or socialization, have a powerful influence on children's gender behaviors (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Queer theory, which links gender stereotypes to the norms of heterosexuality, has been influenced by feminist theory, which has pursued categories of identity and examined how power is distributed among and between them. As such, it is one of the useful ways of understanding the myriad of complexities among identity, oppression, and group dynamics (Watson, 2012). In American society, categories of identity are often *binary*, established by means of a contrast between the dominant group and those excluded from the dominant group (Marinucci, 2016). In terms of *sex* and *gender*, masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality are the only approved social standards of expression (Butler, 1990; Marinucci, 2016). Queer theory disrupts the status quo by avoiding contrasts between female and male, feminine and masculine, homosexual and heterosexual, and so on (Marinucci, 2016).

Larger social institutions, such as schools, have the ability to create environments that perpetuate the dominant discourse of heteronormativity. Donelson and Rogers (2004) define heteronormativity as the "organizational structures that support heterosexuality as normal and anything else as deviant" (p.128). Societal expectations dictate that boys should comply with the *discourse of dominant masculinity* while girls should behave in accordance with the discourse of *subordinate femininity,* and when children's behaviors comply with the dominant gender discourses, they are seen by others as getting their gender "right" (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Using the lens of queer theory directs one's attention to the heterosexual discourses that are present in

early childhood contexts and produce power relations and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, which may impede the academic, social, safety, and educational needs of trans students, who perform nonstereotypical forms of gender (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Bryan, 2012). It is clear that contemporary categories of gender, sex, and sexuality have a negative impact on students with trans identities, and queer theory presents an opportunity to construct alternative categories that challenge a binary opposition by expanding the range of alternatives, trading duality for multiplicity (Marinucci, 2016). By challenging the binary in this way, queer theory is capable of affirming the experiences of people for whom the established categories are problematic, as well as people for whom they are unproblematic (Marinucci, 2016).

As a compliment to the preliminary theoretical framework, in terms of content, the current literature review focuses on (a) the social construction of gender and trans identity development, (b) societal expectations regarding gender, (c) trans children in the context of elementary schools, including the legal responsibilities of schools to create inclusive practices for trans students, and (d) the experiences of caregivers of trans children in the context of schooling.

Sex and Gender Roles

Mainstream cultural awareness of trans identities has increased over the past few years, but the notion that some people are trans remains a new concept to many Americans, and such identities are far from being universally accepted (Boskey, 2014). Social constructions of gender demand conformity to a binary system, and trans individuals transgress gender expectations by deviating from societal gender norms that are associated with sex at birth (Dietert & Dentice, 2015; Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2010). Confusion about what it means to be trans is often compounded by the conflation of several critical terms which are often used interchangeably.

American society views gender as fixed and inherently connected to one's natal, or biological, sex. As defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) sex is "assigned at birth, refers to one's biological status as either male or female, and is associated primarily with physical attributes such as chromosomes, hormone prevalence, and external and internal anatomy" ("Transgender People, Gender Identity and Gender Expression," n.d.). While there are individuals, approximately 1.7% to 2% of live births, called "intersexed," with genetic and chromosomal variations that differ from those generally associated with males and females, babies are, for the most part, born as either male or female (Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Mangin, 2019). Sex has also come to be understood as a legal category that is constructed by institutions and regulated by governmental entities, which establish the criteria for sex categorization (Meyer, 2016).

Gender, on the other hand, refers to one's internal sense of identity and is a societal construct (Brill & Pepper, 2008) assumed to be based on a binary, mandatory system that attributes social characteristics to sexed anatomy (Simmons & White, 2014). Cisnormativity refers to the "perpetuation of the false belief that there are only two genders, that gender is immutable, and that bodies define gender, such that people assigned female at birth will identify as girls/women, and people assigned as male at birth will identify as boys/men" (Simmons & White, 2014). Those who experience congruence between their natal sex and their gender, or, in other words, have binary gender identities that align with cisnormative expectations for the gender they were assigned at birth, are known as cisgender (Simmons & White, 2014). Those whose gender identities do not align with cisnormative expectations for the gender assigned to them at birth, or the expectations associated with that gender are broadly understood as trans (Stryker, 2008). The prefix trans means *to cross boundaries,* and trans is an adjective that refers

to a wide range of gender identities and expressions (Mangin, 2019). Some trans people conform to binary societal gender norms albeit for the "opposite" sex from the one they were assigned at birth, while other nonbinary trans individuals do not conform to the gender binary and may describe themselves as gender fluid, gender queer, gender nonconforming, gender expansive, or agender (Cruz, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2016). Gender expression refers to the ways in which a person expresses gender, in ways such as dress, grooming, hairstyle, behavior, activities, interests, speech, and mannerisms (Brill & Pepper, 2008).

Judith Lorber (1994) refers to gender as a process, rather than a condition. In other words, people perform gender roles within the boundaries of cultural standards. These cultural standards are dependent upon the enduring heteronormative narrative (Butler, 1990), which assume that a child's natal sex corresponds with cultural assumptions about physical appearance, sexual and romantic desires, friendships, academic performance, career ambitions, and interests (Payne & Smith, 2016). caregivers and caregivers begin gendering their children from their very first awareness of them—whether in pregnancy or while awaiting adoption—and children become active participants in the gendering process as soon as they become aware of the social relevance of gender, which occurs before the age of two (Kann et. al., 2016). The idea that gender is performative serves as a reminder that maintaining the gender binary is an active process, so people have the power, both individually and collectively, to choose other forms of gender expression that deliberately disrupt the status quo (Marinucci, 2016).

The social theorist Michael Foucault offers a theoretical perspective that is useful in understanding how gender binary arrangements have been created and maintained in Western culture (Dietert & Dentice, 2015). According to Foucault (1972, 1978), the word *gender* is connected to societal norms and practices specific to two exclusive categories—male and

female— and it is a society's understanding of gender that creates discourse that sustains binary categories. In other words, gender identity and expression are created and supported by social institutions through "rules" of discourse which Foucault called "surfaces of emergence" and "authorities of delimitation" (1972, p. 41). With regard to gender discourse, family and peer groups are the "surfaces of emergence," since it is through these people that gender norms emerge and are sustained. "Authorities of delimitation" are authorities—family, peers, schools, society at large—that maintain and enforce the cultural expectations for "normal" masculine and feminine expression (Foucault, 1972; Payne & Smith, 2016). In the United States, the socialization of the feminine is tied to being soft, passive, and desirable to men, while boys are socialized by "agents of delimitation" to be aggressive, providers and protectors of women, and to renounce all things feminine in themselves as well as in other males (Dietert & Dentice, 2015; Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2010). The gender binary also supports discourse that encourages practices such as wearing "gender-appropriate" clothing, playing with "gender-appropriate" toys, and assuming gender-specific social roles, which disregard the many other forms of expression that emerge with the identity development of trans youth (Dietert & Dentice, 2015).

The sex and gender distinction is furthered by the heteronormative practices and ideologies that exist in larger social institutions, such as school systems, and privilege heteronormative gender and sexuality conformity (Dietert & Dentice, 2015; Slesaransky-Poe & Garcia, 2010). Gender and sexuality are linked in such a way that one's sexuality is often presupposed by one's gender expression, and trans students, who are perceived by their classmates as engaging in forms of masculinity and femininity that run counter to gender conventions, are at a higher risk for bullying and harassment (Dietert & Dentice, 2015; Payne & Smith, 2016). According to the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey,

> Fifty-four percent (54%) of those who were out or perceived as transgender in K-12 were verbally harassed, nearly one-quarter (24%) were physically attacked, and 13% were sexually assaulted in K-12 because of being transgender...Seventeen percent (17%) faced such severe mistreatment as a transgender person that they left a K-12 school. (James et al., 2016, p. 9)

Gender conformity is enforced not only through interactions with teachers and students but through school policies and practices. Trans students are, for the most part, expected to attend schools in contexts where all students are presumed to be *boy* or *girl* and heterosexual, and, unfortunately, stories of schools refusing to recognize name and pronoun changes or to disrupt the status-quo of gender-specific dress codes, activities, and facilities are all too common (Smith & Payne, 2016). Additionally, trans individuals must negotiate their family and peer relationships relative to heteronormative norms, which often results in "anxiety, fear of appraisals for not conforming to gender norms, and differential treatment from both family members and peers" (Dietert & Dentice, 2015, p. 30). Because cisgender individuals live with inherent advantages, the notion that trans identities exist remains a new concept to many Americans, who are often unable to appreciate the complexities of identity as they stretch beyond the existing binaries of sex and gender (Mangin, 2019). Furthermore, assumptions about gender are reflected in pronoun usage, as typically only masculine and feminine pronouns are used (Davis, Zimman, Raclaw, 2014); therefore, the present study will utilize alternative gender pronouns to be respectful of the expansive nature of participants' children's gender identities and presentations. The pronoun "ze" will replace the nominative case gender pronouns "she" and "he," while "hir" will replace the possessive and objective pronouns "her," "hers," "him," and "his."

Gender Identity and Societal Expectations

Early Development

Developmental psychologists agree that children develop an awareness of gender, and gender roles, quite early (Martin & Ruble 2010). For most children, the sex assigned at birth, or their natal sex, will match the gender they feel, but a small minority will vary from the norm of assigned and affirmed gender congruity (Ehrensaft, 2013). Other children will accept their natal sex but not the culturally defined expectations assigned to that gender (Ehrensaft, 2013). As early as age two, children begin to acquire knowledge of gender labels, and some children begin to make statements about their gender not matching their natal sex (Ehrensaft, 2013). By age three to four most children have a sense of their own gender identity, and, with gender stereotype knowledge developing rapidly during this time, they use gender to guide their expectations of others' appearances and behaviors (Martin & Ruble, 2010). By the time children are in elementary school many trans children have been consistent and persistent in their identities for several years (Brill & Pepper, 2008), so schools can be uncomfortable places for trans students, who defy binary gender norms and whose actions are constantly being measured against heteronormative standards (Luecke, 2011). A child's experience at school can significantly enhance or undermine hir sense of self; therefore, emotional safety as a precursor for learning must be prioritized so that trans students, who are frequently the targets of teasing and bullying, can learn effectively in supportive school environments (Luecke, 2011).

Trans Identities: A New Visibility

While there is a lack of longitudinal data documenting the trans population over time, scholars agree that the increased visibility of trans people is likely a result of greater acceptance and the changing notion that a trans identity is inherently dysfunctional (Boskey, 2014), rather

than an actual increase in population size (Stryker, 2017). A new model of childhood gender affirmation is emerging, which suggests that children are acutely aware of their emerging gender identities from a very young age, and it is the role of the family, community, and society to support and affirm these children's authentic gender identities (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Ehrensaft, 2013). In 2013, the less pathologizing term *Gender Dysphoria* replaced the *Gender Identity Disorder* diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) and identified the distress and discomfort associated with gender incongruence as the clinical problem rather than the incongruence itself (Boskey, 2014). Additionally, the new World Professional Association for Transgender Youth (WPATH) Standards of Care assert that treatment which employs behavior modification, parental counseling, and/or environmental shaping to get a child to accept the gender assigned at birth or the societal expectations for that binary gender assignment is unethical (WPATH, 2012, p.16). Parenting approaches have also begun to shift from the pathology, or reparative, approach, in which gender non-conformity is regarded as a mental illness in need of correction (Zucker, 2008), to an affirmative approach, in which trans identities are regarded as unproblematic aspects of human diversity that are in need of affirmation (Ehrensaft, 2016). Lev (2004) says of the affirmative approach, "The focus is not on changing the child, but helping him or her adapt to the constraints of a gendered culture while simultaneously working to change the social system that encourages abuse [of trans identities]" (p. 346). Although this is a good step toward embracing a more inclusive and affirmative approach to gender, additional research in this area may be helpful in continuing to dismantle the heteronormative beliefs upon which a diagnosis regarding gender is based. Continuing to critically examine the heteronormative standards on which gender-related diagnoses are created may render the perceived need for such diagnoses obsolete.

Incongruence between natal sex and gender can cause distress, which the medical community refers to as "gender dysphoria (GD)." Not all trans people experience GD but for those who do, it can lead to feelings of inadequacy, humiliation, self-hatred, and depression (Mangin, 2019). These mental health issues are often not related to a child's internal feelings of gender at all but are instead due to a larger social inability to be accepting of hir gender (Meyer, 2016). Ehrensaft (2013) offers a treatment modality called "true gender self-therapy," which has a simple goal of building a trans child's "gender resilience" (p. 13) and exploring authentic gender identity. As a mental health professional who works with trans youth, Ehrensaft (2013) sees the value in facilitating a child's acquisition of a "psychological toolkit" (p. 13) which will allow the child to internalize a positive self-identity while also recognizing situations in which that identity may be in need of protection from an unaccepting and/or hostile genderist environment. As identity is crucial to well-being, helping children to feel more "real" may be one of the most important aspects of supporting trans children (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Additionally, an increasing number of trans children are "socially transitioning." This phrase is used to refer to the decision by a family to allow a child to present to others as their authentic gender identity rather than hir natal sex (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). A social transition offers trans children an opportunity to alter their gender expression from one that is dictated by social norms to one that is more closely aligned to their authentic gender identity (Luecke, 2011). Social transitions also offer children the chance to further embrace their trans identities by requesting the use of names and pronouns that correspond to their authentic gender identities (Luecke, 2011). Additionally, they may request the use of restrooms and locker rooms that correspond to the gender identities they consistently assert at school (Luecke, 2011).

Although there are no large studies of trans prepubescent children to date, a number of smaller studies have compared children diagnosed with GD who were unable to socially transition with trans children who have socially transitioned and present themselves to others as the gender they "feel," rather than that assumed by their natal sex (Olsen, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016). These studies consistently report that the socially transitioned trans children had lower levels of anxiety and depression and better overall mental health outcomes in comparison with the children who experienced GD yet were unable to socially transition (Olsen, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016). These findings suggest that supportive social contexts and interactions could be associated with better mental health outcomes in trans children (Olsen, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016).

Pubertal Changes

Although gender identity develops in early childhood, it is also important to consider the impact of adolescence on continued identity development (Brill & Pepper, 2008), since, during puberty and early adulthood, gender identity generally becomes fully developed (Brill & Pepper, 2008). Puberty brings hormonal and concurrent physical changes that often clarify for a trans child that they are going through the "wrong" puberty. As such, adolescence can be a particularly difficult time in trans children's lives, as the development of sex characteristics may conflict with their own internal sense of self, which can be distressing (Boskey, 2014)). The availability of hormone blockers in recent years has been a tremendous gain for trans youth. Hormone blockers are gender-affirming interventions that are administered to early pubertal trans youth to halt their puberty development while they continue to explore their true gender selves. Hormone blockers eliminate the potential trauma associated with an unwanted puberty and offer trans youth an opportunity to proceed in developing the secondary sex characteristics of their affirmed gender

without the imposition and risks that are associated with biomedical transitions, such as hormone treatments and chest surgeries (Ehrensaft, 2013; Mangin, 2019).

Trans Children in Schools

Trans children face unique circumstances surrounding gender identity and expression in schools. Despite reaching a historical moment when legal recognition of trans identities and relationships are starting to gain momentum, the general public, including our nation's teachers and administrators, still misunderstands the possibilities for trans gender identities and are unsure about how to protect and serve trans students (Smith & Payne, 2016). Trans students, who do not express their gender in accord with societal expectations, are ill-served by the current social climates in the majority of our nation's public schools. According to a 2019 GLSEN survey almost half of all trans students reported missing at least one day of school due to being frequently teased and bullied and experiencing confusion, shame, and anxiety (Kosciw et. al., 2020), and a 2014 National Mental Health Association report asserts that four out of five trans youth could not identify a single supportive adult in their schools. In fact, sixty percent of trans students admit to not reporting incidents of bullying to school staff, because the staff would often do nothing in response. Grossman and D'Augelli (2006) summarize the perceptions of their trans respondents by stating, "Attending school was reported to be the most traumatic aspect of growing up" (p. 122).

Increased media attention has also led to an increase of awareness of the challenges faced by transgender children. *The Huffington Post* regularly publishes articles focused on trans children and their families, and the roles schools play in supporting the trans child's identity development (Beck, 2015). Other popular media outlets have also provided a glance into the personal experiences of trans children, such as Coy Mathis and Jazz Jennings, whose stories

illuminate the issues related to the intersection of trans identities and schooling (Beck, 2015). When he was in kindergarten, Coy—who, since the age of two, had been asking his caregivers when his "girl parts" would come and showed signs of depression when forced to wear "boy" clothes—lined up with the girls and was publicly corrected by his teacher who told him, "You're a boy," (Beck, 2015). Jazz Jennings, who is now age 14, is one of the most visible faces of trans youth. Transitioning in the public eye, Jazz started identifying as female as early as 15-months-old, and she appeared on a Barbara Walters Special talking about her trans identity when she was just six years old. Nonetheless, when they registered her for school, her caregivers were required to register her as male—her natal sex—even though she presents as female at school (Beck, 2015). Although media attention is an important contribution to the overall literature on trans children and their experiences, scholarly research has only just begun to explore the experiences of trans students and their families with regard to schools.

While the multiple functions of "gender" in school settings are difficult to fully grasp, it is clear that pre-K-12 schools explicitly and implicitly reinforce heterosexual ideals and interpretations of gender and sexuality, which are particularly harmful to trans youth, who begin to discover at an early age that something fundamental about their identities is unacceptable (Bryan, 2012). From the clothes they wear, to the toys they are offered, to the way they are seated or asked to line up, students are constantly immersed in the enduring gender binary that presents itself in schools. While the multiple functions of "gender" in school settings is difficult to grasp a few things are clear: (1) Children are constantly immersed in gender identity instruction (GII), and teachers, consciously and unconsciously, engage in GII with students everyday, often reinforcing gender stereotypes and the gender binary (Bryan, 2012); (2) For children and adolescents, gender identity and expression are part of everyday life and, early in

life, children learn to value males over females and to attribute more power and importance to masculine traits over feminine qualities (Wilbourn & Kee, 2010); (3) Whether through parenting, schooling, or the media, children and adolescents have their gender identities affirmed or discouraged all of the time (Bryan, 2012); and (4) Children whose gender expressions exist outside the boundaries of a strict, binary system are at risk for victimization at school, but their teachers, many fearing backlash from angry caregivers or administration, are not willing to engage in curriculum-based work aimed at challenging the heteronormative narrative (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010).

Schools are common sites for gender policing (Mayo, 2015), and trans students, who do not conform to binary gender norms, are often met with high levels of intolerance and often become the targets of discrimination and bullying, including physical abuse (Roberts et. al., 2012). Payne and Smith (2016) define gender policing as "the social process of enforcing cultural expectations for "normal" masculine and feminine expression" (p. 129). Traditional gender norms are constructed by a number of social forces: peer groups, caregivers, the media, and schools (Payne & Smith 2016), and schools affect youth through curricula, teacher-student interactions, and the formal structuring of activities. As such, K-12 schools are primary sites for maintaining heteronormativity. When children transgress gender expectations, they are seen as "abnormal" and "deviant," and they create anxiety for caregivers and educators who fear the unfamiliar and who have themselves bought into the system of a gender binary that rules school cultures, policies, and procedures (Garcia & Slesaranky-Poe, 2010). Children also learn homophobia and transphobia at a very early age. For example, they learn that "gay" can mean anything that is ugly or does not work properly and that there are "boy" activities and "girl" activities (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). Additionally, there is little attention paid to the persistent

patterns of peer targeting, and students whose genders do not normatively align with their biological sex are the frequent targets of bullying and harassment (Payne & Smith, 2016).

In addition to peer interactions that perpetuate heteronormativity, teachers also maintain the heteronormative narrative when they reinforce the gender binary by reverting to gender-biased behaviors, whether consciously or unconsciously. Although most teachers report intending to treat all students equitably, boys and girls often receive very different treatment. Teachers often call on boys more often than girls, wait longer for answers, and give more specific feedback to boys (Sadker & Zittleman, 2005). In addition, they often make assumptions that girls and boys are essentially different, and that students must fall into one of two distinct categories (male or female), and nothing in between. They do this most often through gender-segregation- girls vs. boys competitions, girls directed to line up in one place and boys in another, teachers referring to students as "girls" and "boys," instead of a more gender neutral word/ category (Bryan, 2012). In these situations, trans students report feeling as if they have to choose between being themselves and being safe and accepted (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009).

Teachers are uniquely qualified to help students learn about gender and sexuality diversity (GSD), but, historically, they have not been trained or encouraged to explicitly engage with the gender and sexuality of their students, and many report a hesitancy in doing so, fearing a backlash from angry caregivers and/or administrative reprimand (Bryan, 2012). For example, in a study by Payne and Smith (2014), school personnel were interviewed regarding their desire and ability to intervene in peer harassment, and the results revealed that teachers sometimes felt as if they were unable to intervene based on the ambiguous or inconclusive nature of school policies. In particular, teachers in the aforementioned study reported a fear of losing their job from intervening due to the possibility of having conversations about sex, gender, and sexuality with

the children, which are often deemed unacceptable conversations per school policies (Payne & Smith, 2014). Every teacher is concerned with the age-appropriateness of conversations and curricular materials, and teachers' fears of including trans people in the curriculum is supported by broader social discourses that children are too young to think about "sex" (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006). Dominant Western notions of "the child" emphasize that childhood is a time of presumed innocence, and schools have a duty to protect children from the dangers of adult life (Rehily, 2004). Research has shown, however, that children and adolescents are being bombarded with highly gendered and sexualized messages from the media and the unregulated sources on the Internet, which ensure that children are grappling with sex and gender, whether these issues are addressed in school or not (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). Data also suggest that notions of sex and sexuality infuse everyday social interactions and conversations throughout the school day, even in the lives of elementary-aged children, and even during formal instruction time (Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013). It is clear, then, that schools are in an advantageous position to counter the misinformation students are getting from the mainstream media, since teachers are positioned to lead thoughtful, informed, and well-trained conversations (Bryan, 2012).

Trans Students and School Safety

In the past few years, bullying as a social phenomenon has gained greater visibility; however, the focus of the subset of bullying research specifically investigating trans student bullying has emphasized the negative academic and psychological effects that bullying has had on the "victim," with little attention having been paid to the aggressors (Payne & Smith, 2018). This dominant narrative of school bullying is based on an inaccurate premise: It assumes that schools are neutral sites where all students have an equal opportunity to succeed (Payne &

Smith, 2016). The limitations of this narrative, while there are many, include (a) the failure to recognize how schools themselves frequently provide the conditions for bullying to flourish, and (b) the refusal to position aggression that targets trans students within a broader system of gender regulation within school environments (Payne & Smith, 2016). In other words, understanding the notion of bullying in a generic manner by focusing on the individual behavior and relational power between individuals fails to account for institutional heteronormativity, which is the formal organizational structure through which schools function and students interact with one another (Payne & Smith, 2016). Schools must come to understand the problems of trans student bullying differently if they want to experience different outcomes in their intervention efforts.

Gender policing. Olweus, whose definition of bullying is frequently used in bullying scholarship, defines bullying as a "specific type of aggressive behavior characterized by intent, repetition, and an imbalance of power between the bully and the victim" (Payne & Smith, 2016, p. 4). This binary construction of bullying deflects the causes of in-school aggression to cultural forces and familial values and ignores the possibility that school culture could be responsible for reproducing and reinforcing cultural patterns of power, privilege, and marginalization, rather than critically examining what schools are teaching students about who belongs and who does not (Payne & Smith, 2016). The concept of gender policing expands the bullying narrative by considering the complex system of social interactions through which young people negotiate their positions within social hierarchies (Payne & Smith, 2016). Researchers, through their observations and interviews with youth, have generated evidence that illustrates how heteronormativity, which inscribes a linear relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality, dominates school settings and how individuals, whose masculinity or femininity are perceived to violate this cultural standard, experience various levels of aggression from microaggressions to

overt verbal and physical violence (Payne & Smith, 2016). As students go about their days, all of their actions and interactions are measured against heteronormative standards, which serve as tools for acquiring social power (Payne & Smith, 2016). Most of the time the interactions escape adult notice, but when adults do notice, they often view the interactions as "normal" or inconsequential (Renold, Ashton, & McGeeney, 2021), despite the fact that children are, at times, explicitly disparaging queer-inclusive sexualities and, at other times, constructing heteronormative perspectives as the only way to live and love (Payne & Smith, 2016). In Payne & Smith's (2016) study, students repeatedly expressed a desire for heterosexual connections, while constructing same-sex sexuality as "surprising, upsetting, and unwelcome" (p.82). In their ethnographic research on 10- and 11-year-old children's social relationships, Renold, Ashton, and McGeeney (2021) found that both boys and girls policed one another's behaviors in relation to their cultural expectations. Pre-adolescent girls policed one another within the boundaries of innocence and "sexual propriety," (p.320), while their male peers policed one another around standards of physical and emotional toughness (Renold, Ashton, and McGeeney, 2021).

All types of gender policing are damaging, and all youth are vulnerable to targeting, but trans youth are particularly vulnerable to escalating violence that creates hostile learning environments (Payne & Smith, 2016). "Slut" and "fag" are two of the most common and most powerful weapons youth use to target each other's gender transgressions (Payne, 2012), and these words are not only used against individuals who are gay or who are known to be sexually active. Instead, they are used by cisgender students to verbally target, and thus separate themselves from, peers who did not conform to society's standards of masculinity and femininity (Renold, Ashton, and McGeeney, 2021). Because gender-based aggressions circulate through all types of social interactions, gender policing is a day-to-day reality of children and youth (Payne

& Smith, 2016). To thoroughly address the marginalization of trans students in educational contexts, new approaches to school violence, approaches that not only address the individual acts of violence but also address schools as cultural sites which privilege heteronormative gender conformity, are needed (Payne & Smith, 2016).

Legal Responsibilities

Binary gender enculturation occurs throughout childhood, and the concept of gender policing illuminates bullying as a social function that maintains the peer boundaries for "normal" gender (Payne & Smith, 2016). Ansara and Hagarty (2012) add that cisgenderism, which reinforces that there are only two genders and affirms that gender is determined on the basis of assigned sex, both legitimizes and makes the mistreatment of trans people understandable, since the mistreatment is seen as being caused by the trans person's "non-conformity," rather than to social norms. The growing number of trans children who are disclosing information about their gender at a young age presents new responsibilities for schools to create and/or revise policies and procedures that facilitate inclusion. Legally, under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (20 U.S.C. § 1681) schools cannot discriminate against trans students. In 2014, to clarify these federal protections, the Office for Civil Rights of the United States Department of Education (DOE) issued guidelines, which stated, in part:

> Under Title IX, a recipient generally must treat transgender students consistent with their gender identity in all aspects of the planning, implementation, enrollment, operation, and evaluation of single-sex classes (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2014, p. 25).

Unfortunately, in 2017, the Trump administration rescinded the guidelines and took steps to restrict trans people's civil rights and legitimize, legalize, foster, and condone structural

gender-based discrimination and practices (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2019). In response to the Trump-era policies intended to erase, rollback, and/or nullify trans students' rights, some states, such as Massachusetts and New York, have developed their own guidelines for educating trans youth; however, current data show that only 16 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.) have adopted anti-bullying laws that specifically prohibit the bullying or harassment of students based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Kosciw, et. al., 2020). Of these states, only 13 states and D.C. also carry nondiscrimination laws that are designed to protect students on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (Kosciw, et. al., 2020).

During the 2022 legislative session, 12 states will consider anti-LGBTQIA+ bills aimed at discriminating against LGBTQIA+ youth in schools. These bills target trans people for discrimination by barring or criminalizing healthcare for trans youth, barring access to the use of appropriate facilities like restrooms, restricting trans students' ability to fully participate in school and sports, prohibiting classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels, and prohibiting teachers and others from discussing their gender identities (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022). Perhaps the most talked about measures came out of Texas and Florida. In March of 2022, Governor Greg Abbott of Texas issued a letter to Texas state health agencies announcing that delivering gender-affirming medical treatments to transgender youths "constitutes child abuse" under state law. The letter stipulated that doctors, nurses and teachers are legally now required to report parents who aid their child in receiving such care to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) (Sharrow, E. & Sederbaum, I., 2022).

Recent court rulings have upheld existing protections for trans students under Title IX and the Equal Protection Clause of the U.S. Constitution. Collectively the decisions indicate the

following: (1) that schools must allow equal access to restrooms for trans students, (2) policies that protect trans students do not violate other students' rights, and (3) discrimination against trans students is considered sex discrimination (Mangin, 2019).

In this legal context, schools have a responsibility to develop appropriate policies and protocols for meeting the needs of trans students. While there is a steadily growing body of literature for mental health professionals working with trans children, little has been available to school systems grappling with how best to serve and protect their trans students. This is of concern since trans children are "the most vulnerable because they receive both intensely negative messages and almost no peer support or understanding" (Bochenek & Brown, 2001, p. 174). Data from the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE)'s 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey did include critical national data about the past school experiences of trans people, which included high rates of violence at school and the corresponding detrimental effects on socioeconomic outcomes and psychological well-being; however, because the NCTE survey was retrospective and completed by adults, the results cannot speak to the current experiences of trans youth and their school climates (Kosciw et. al., 2020).

Since 1999, GLSEN has responded to the need for national data by conducting biennial school climate surveys. In addition to documenting the unique challenges trans students face in the context of schooling, the surveys have also identified interventions that can improve school climate for trans students (Kowciw et al., 2020). The 2019 survey found that trans students who had trans-related school resources reported better school experiences and academic success; however, too many schools failed to provide these critical resources (Kowciw et al., 2020). The school-related resources that had a positive effect on trans students' experiences include the following: Gay/Straight Alliances/Gender and Sexuality Alliances, inclusive curricular

resources, supportive educators, and inclusive and supportive school policies (Kowciw et al., 2020).

Additionally, several small-scale studies have examined trans students' experiences (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Ehrensaft, 2013; Luecke, 2011; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010), cisgender educators' beliefs (Meyer, 2008; Payne & Smith, 2014), and the educational experiences of caregivers with trans children (Baldwin, 2015; Barron & Capous-Desyllas, 2017; Johnson et al., 2014; Kuvalanka, Weiner, & Mahan, 2014; Pyne, 2016; Slesaransky-Poe et al. 2013). Despite the limited research, the studies that exist are informative. A study by Luecke (2011), which analyzed journal entries, lesson plans, and interviews with students and their caregivers, suggests that collaboration between caregivers of trans children and school personnel as well as transparent communication between school administration and educators are significant factors in creating affirming and supportive environments for trans students. Similarly, Sausa (2005), in her qualitative study describing the school experiences of 24 trans youth in Philadelphia, presents recommendations for school administrators and educators, which include challenging gender norms and avoiding activities that force children to participate based on gender norms, as well as addressing harassment and bullying immediately and adding more inclusive and affirming educational information to the curricula (Sausa, 2005). Given the negative school experiences that trans students report, the need for additional research is critical and should focus on exploring schools as cultural sites where litigation, legislation, and educational practice intersect (Payne & Smith, 2012).

Experiences of Caregivers of Transgender Children

The issues faced by families of trans youth are multiple and complex, but a central feature of their experiences is the struggle created between trying to support their child's gender

expression while maintaining their personal safety through monitoring, censoring, and social conformity (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). While the simplistic and outdated idea that bad caregiver/caregiving causes trans identities in youth, newer views of gender identity recognize the active processes through which children themselves creatively produce and reproduce gender (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). While the research within the past decade has begun to reframe trans identities as part of the range of human diversity (Ehrensaft, 2013), it also suggests that caregivers of trans children experience struggles as they confront their own fears, accept their children's gender identities, and negotiate those identities within institutions (Pyne, 2016).

As the literature on caregivers of trans children grows, a focus on the struggles, including an emphasis on loss, during and after a child's coming out is noticeable (Gonzalez, Rostosky, Odom, & Riggle, 2013; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017). Research on adult development suggests that caregivers learn and grow based on interactions with their children, and adults reach advanced stages of development when they engage in challenging experiences and restructure their worldviews in response to these challenges. Because of the common social stigma associated with trans identities, parenting a trans child may provide opportunities for this type of challenge, cognitive disequilibrium, and ultimate growth (Gonzalez, Rostosky, Odom, & Riggle, 2013). A 2009 study by Hill and Menvielle also documented caregivers' fears and concerns regarding their child's safety, future happiness, and adjustment, as they wrestled with concerns that their child was gay or trans (Hill & Menvielle, 2009). The caregivers, during their interviews, reported that their fears were especially pronounced when they thought about their children entering elementary school, where they feared they would experience intolerance and be "socially ostracized, teased, bullied, or even violently attacked" (Hill & Menvielle, 2009, p. 259).

More recent studies have begun to explore alternative accounts of "loss" (Riggs, 2019; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017), critiquing the focus on loss that is evident in guides for caregivers as well as in academic writing. For example, Brill and Pepper (2008) tell parent readers that:

> The grief that caregivers raising gender variant and transgender children experience falls into two distinct categories. The first is the grief over the lost dreams for your child. The second is the grief that caregivers of transgender children feel for the child who goes away in order for the new one to emerge...Perhaps the most painful part of the process of accepting your child is letting go of the fantasies you held for your child—and also the fantasies of what you were going to share together in the future. (Brill & Pepper, 2008, p. 45)

Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2017) suggest that this idea of "loss" is highly problematic in that it reinforces the idea that gender is determined by natal sex, and that a child who is male or female at birth can somehow be psychologically and/or physically absent if hir gender identity does not match the normative expectations for hir natal sex. Thus—concerned with the ways in which previous narratives of loss attribute the cause of loss to trans children themselves, rather than to cisgenderism—Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2017) suggest shifting the focus away from the trans child and onto the broader context in which caregivers and trans children live. Framed in this way, the loss that some caregivers of trans children report may more accurately be seen as the loss of inherent privileges that accompany having a cisgender child (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017). Considering the role that caregivers have in advocating on behalf of their children with regard to educational settings, it is important to better understand the ways in which caregivers of

trans children engage with school systems where their privileged positions are called into question (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017).

Caregivers of Trans Children in the Context of Schools

Due to the general lack of inclusive policies in schools, caregivers of trans children are required to work with school staff, administrators, and boards in order to ensure a safe environment in which their child may receive an education (Johnson, et al., 2014). caregivers of trans children have reported a loss of certainty about what they can expect from schools, because schools have failed to address cisgenderism and/or ensure that inclusive policies and protocols are in place and followed (Riggs, 2015). Despite the scarcity of literature on the trans population in elementary schools, foundational literature does exist. Searches of scholarly databases identified several pieces of research that focused on the educational experiences of caregivers with trans children (Baldwin, 2015; Barron & Capous-Desyllas, 2017; Johnson et al., 2014; Kuvalanka, Weiner, & Mahan, 2014; Pyne, 2016; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017; Riley et al. 2011; Slesaransky-Poe et al. 2013).

The studies by Baldwin (2015) and then Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2017) provide a useful framework through which to summarize the other pieces of work, as they both categorized caregivers' patterns of experiences with school systems into one of three groups: (1) schools that were inclusive, (2) schools that tried to be inclusive, and (3) schools that were restrictive with regard to supporting trans children and their caregivers. A key feature of inclusive schools is that they were proactive in developing and implementing inclusive policies and procedures, such as strong anti-bullying policies, that were inclusive of trans students (Baldwin, 2015) and that directly addressed the reasons for bullying, rather than viewing bullying as isolated incidents (Payne & Smith, 2012). Additionally, they are depicted in research as "taking the lead" in

ensuring the inclusion of trans children, through providing information to staff, following already existing guidelines, and "accepting" children as they are (Riggs and Bartholomaues, 2017).

Attempts at inclusion occurred in schools when caregivers requested that schools revisit their policies or their (often non-existent) procedures regarding trans students—use of restrooms and/or locker rooms, uniforms, sports teams—and this was met with a positive response (Baldwin, 2015, Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017). Different from inclusive schools, schools that tried to be inclusive did not have policies in place at the time that a trans student was enrolled, but they were willing to make changes in an attempt to be inclusive. These changes were often limited as illustrated in Pyne's (2016) research, which found that when cisgender students expressed discomfort in sharing a restroom with trans students, a separate, gender-neutral, restroom was created for trans students to use. Additionally, in schools that tried to be inclusive, caregivers had to be strong advocates for their children, and, in many cases, they spoke about providing information sessions to schools, so that educators and administrators could respond more effectively to families (Slesaransky-Poe et al., 2013). Relying on individual caregivers to advocate for their children and educate the school is a serious limitation, since caregivers could be out of step with state policies and legislation and/or with current research regarding best practice recommendations (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017). Another limitation associated with schools that attempted to be inclusive was that, due to the time-pressured nature of moving towards inclusion, staff reported feeling "burnt out" by the level of support needed to be inclusive, particularly with regards to bullying (Johnson et al., 2016).

Currently, most of the research reports on schools that are restrictive, which echoes the negative experiences trans students have reported with regard to schools (Kosciw et. al., 2020). In terms of the negative experiences reported by caregivers, certain key areas predominated the

literature. The first area pertains to how schools viewed trans students. For example, caregivers found schools to be restrictive when the school considered their child to be "outside the norm," which occurred in schools where gender and sexuality were conflated and where discrimination and marginalization arose from cisgenderism (Johnson et al., 2016). In these schools, caregivers reported needing to be constantly vigilant in order to protect and support their children, because the lack of a clear and accurate understanding of trans identities often led schools to adopt restrictive and regressive approaches to engaging with trans students and their families (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017).

Another area where caregivers reported having negative experiences was with regard to other caregivers, especially when it came to the disclosure of their children's trans identities. One study reported on the experiences of a parent who attempted to enroll her trans child in school, only to be met with resistance from other caregivers and a school administration that, instead of challenging the other caregivers' views, did not take action (Kuvalanka et al., 2014). Other caregivers reported being advised by school personnel to conceal their child's trans identity, which, they were told, might be met with discrimination (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017). These types of responses by schools have led caregivers, in some cases, to homeschool their children, while other caregivers have moved their families to be closer to more inclusive schools (Baldwin, 2015; Johnson et al., 2014; Pyne, 2016; Riley et al., 2011).

Mangin (2020), in her study of supportive elementary school leaders, identified three key characteristics of principals that, when combined, increased principals' capacities to meet trans students' needs. First, the principals serve as lead learners, modeling a learning stance by emphasizing the importance of building knowledge and understanding about gender and trans identities. Second, they employ a child-centered approach, focusing on each student's individual

needs. Third, supportive principals foster strong school-family collaboration (Mangin, 2020). Additionally, Mangin (2020) found that teachers were able to create classrooms where trans students experienced affirmation and belonging, which are necessary for engagement and learning, when they reduced gendered classroom management strategies (i.e. gendered bathroom passes and seating arrangements), increased discussions about gender, and affirmed trans children's identities in multiple ways, such as using children's chosen names and pronouns and validating students' clothing choices.

Given the struggles that trans children face in their schools, caregivers have an opportunity to play an integral role in advocating for their trans child's needs. As there continues to be a lack of research pertaining to the experiences and perspectives of young trans students, this study attempts to better understand trans students' elementary school experiences by focusing on the experiences of the caregivers of trans children and the challenges they face in supporting their children's gender identities and expressions.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Introduction

Most of the research on trans gender identities has focused on the experiences and perspectives of adults, but the increasing visibility of trans children, as they are identified by their caregivers, presents a new opportunity to examine how elementary school environments might affect the safety, engagement, and inclusion of students who challenge the gender binary (Rahilly, 2014). Utilizing a phenomenological approach, I developed the present qualitative study to gain a better understanding of caregivers' perceptions of their trans children's experiences in elementary schools in the United States. The remote research purpose was to identify supportive characteristics of school climates that should be enhanced and unsupportive characteristics whose effects might be ameliorated in service of reducing the challenges faced by trans youth. To successfully develop the required strategies, more knowledge is needed about the current climates in elementary schools, as they pertain to trans students. Therefore, the immediate goal of this study was to seek input from caregivers about their experiences in the caregiving role of a trans student as they interacted with their children's elementary schools. The caregivers' stories illuminate both the successes and challenges of school environments for trans students. In addition, I examined the perceived availability of resources and supports in school for trans students (e.g., Gay-Straight or Gender and Sexuality Alliances, anti-bullying/harassment and transgender and gender expansive student policies, supportive school staff, and curricular resources that are inclusive of LGBT+-related topics).

The questions guiding this research were:

1. What are caregiver's perceptions of their trans children's elementary school experiences?

2. What do caregivers describe as the supportive and unsupportive characteristics of their children's elementary schools?

For the purpose of this study, *trans* refers to the "spectrum of individuals whose gender identities do not align with cisnormative expectations for the gender assigned to them at birth, or the expectations associated with that gender" (Stryker, 2008), and includes both the terms *binary* and *nonbinary trans*. Stryker (2008) defines *binary trans* as a trans person with a binary identity (i.e., "man" or "woman") and *nonbinary trans* as an individual who identifies as an alternative gender that lies outside the gender binary altogether (i.e., "gender expansive," "gender fluid," and "genderqueer).

Theoretical Framework

Queer pedagogy, which explores the intersection between queer theory and critical pedagogy, served as the primary focus guiding this inquiry (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Critical theory challenges current notions of educational reality, encourages change, identifies those whom can implement change, and serves as a catalyst for social transformation (Kinchelog & McClaren, 2000; Wing, 2004), while queer theory links gender stereotypes to the norms of heterosexuality and questions the assumption that there is any "normal" expression of gender (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Using the theoretical lens of queer theory directs one's attention to the heterosexual discourses that are present in early childhood contexts and produce power relations and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, which may impede the academic, social, safety, and educational needs of trans students (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Bryan, 2012). "Are you a boy or a girl?" is a common question heard among children that demonstrates how gender is policed, even among young children. The question frames gender as a binary concept and reinforces the idea that gender should be easy to discern based on physical appearance. For trans students, being

asked this question can evoke feelings of shame and humiliation (Mangin, 2020). Additionally, schools are inherently gendered spaces, both physically and conceptually, which reproduce traditional gender norms that situate trans students as different or "other." Research methods outlined in this chapter promote the opportunity for recognizing the effects of implied or implicit hegemony and consequently move towards change.

Qualitative Phenomenological Research

The goal of this study was to learn more about the lived experiences of trans students who are attending elementary schools in the United States. Given that I sought to gain knowledge about participants' unique, lived experiences, qualitative research was the appropriate lens from which to conduct the study. I used a phenomenological approach to investigate the individual perceptions and views caregivers had regarding their trans children's experiences in elementary schools. A phenomenological approach is recommended to study different individuals' reactions to similar experiences (Creswell, 2013; Cressell & Plano Clark, 2010; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This methodology provided a lens with which I described and interpreted participants' experiences. Accounting for their perceptions provided me with a powerful perspective with which to examine the supportive and/or unsupportive characteristics of elementary schools as they pertain to trans children. A closer look at the data collected will allow for a more in-depth and critical look into the systematic oppression that exists within the various social locations in which underserved individuals and families live (Creswell, 2007; Marinucci, 2010). The findings from this study may be important for school district leadership responsible for creating and/or revising policies and procedures that facilitate inclusion and produce meaningful shifts in the shared norms that constitute school culture. The specific details regarding the research design are delineated in subsequent sections of this chapter.

Context of the Study

The intention of this research was to gather data regarding the perspectives of research participants (caregivers) about the phenomenon being studied (trans children's experiences in elementary schools). For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to specify what I mean when I refer to "school climate." The National School Climate Council (2007) recommends that *school climate* be defined in the following ways:

> School climate is based on patterns of people's experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures.
>
> A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families, and educators work together to develop, live, and contribute to a shared vision (p. 4).

A review of school climate research indicated that a positive school climate is consistently associated with (a) academic achievement; (b) social, emotional, intellectual, and physical safety; (c) positive youth development and mental health; (d) healthy relationships, school connectedness, and engagement; and (e) higher graduation rates (Cohen & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). In their review of more than 200 references, Cohen and Higgins-D'Alessandro (2013) identified the following five dimensions of school climate:

I. Safety (e.g., rules and norms, physical and social-emotional safety)

II. Relationships (e.g., respect for diversity, school connectedness and engagement, social support, leadership, and students' race/ethnicity and their perceptions of school climate)

III. Teaching and Learning (e.g., social, emotional, ethical, civic, and service learning; support for academic learning and professional relationships)

IV. Institutional Environment (e.g., physical surroundings, resources, and supplies)

V. The School Improvement Process

Unfortunately, numerous studies reveal that several aspects of school climate are particularly problematic for trans students (Zaza, Kann, & Barrios, 2016; Kann et. al., 2016a) and negative experiences related to safety and relationships among students and staff within schools have been reported by disproportionately more trans students compared to cisgender youth (Rose et. al., 2018). Further, GLSEN has identified the following as indicators of negative school climate:

- Hearing biased and/or homophobic remarks
- Feeling unsafe in school because of personal characteristics
- Missing school because of safety reasons
- Experiencing harassment and/or assault in school
- Experiencing discriminatory policies and practices at school

Alternatively, Mangin (2020), in her study of supportive elementary school leaders, identified three key characteristics of principals that, when combined, increased principals' capacities to meet trans students' needs. First, the principals serve as lead learners, modeling a learning stance by emphasizing the importance of building knowledge and understanding about gender and trans identities. Second, they employ a child-centered approach, focusing on each

student's individual needs. Third, supportive principals foster strong school-family collaboration (Mangin, 2020). Additionally, Mangin (2020) found that teachers were able to create classrooms where trans students experienced affirmation and belonging, which are necessary for engagement and learning, when they reduced gendered classroom management strategies (i.e., gendered bathroom passes and seating arrangements), increased discussions about gender, and affirmed trans children's identities in multiple ways, such as using children's chosen names and pronouns and validating students' clothing choices.

Researcher Positionality

> "Ordinarily, we are unaware of the special lens through which we look at life. It would hardly be fish who discovered the existence of water."
>
> —Clyde Kluckhohn (1949, p. 11)

Approaching the current study from a queer theory perspective made it very important for me to be continuously reflexive and attentive to any biases I may have had, in order to remain as minimally biased as possible. Reflexivity is the process of reflecting on one's own privilege, power, bias, perspective, and assumptions in order to consider the ways in which they may influence the researcher's collection and interpretation of data (Fischer, 2009, Tufford & Newman, 2012). Additionally, Moustakas (1994, p. 85) stated that researchers must "set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived notions about things" we are trying to understand, so that we are able to describe the true "lived experiences" of the participants and be able to say to ourselves, "I understand better [now] what it is like for someone to experience that" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 46).

As a cisgender, White, heterosexual woman, I am an outsider on multiple fronts of a sensitive terrain, with inherent privileges that afford me the option of remaining unaware of the lives and struggles of those who do not have the same privileges. As such, I was concerned that

my position as a cisgender person hoping to elicit sensitive information from caregivers of trans children might affect the recruitment efforts of the study. I was aware that potential participants may have been wary of sharing their children's experiences with someone outside the trans community, fearing that I would not be able to understand their experiences and/or that I would inaccurately interpret the data. In order to combat this potential problem, I informed participants of my long-term advocacy for the trans community as well as my own personal experiences with gender identity development.

It was not until my mid-twenties that the I really "woke up" to the feminist message. A friend of mine began sharing some books and articles that certainly resonated with my experiences, and I started to become acutely aware of how I had spent much of my life navigating daily sexism in public, in school, and in my relationships. I was attending a small Catholic college in northeastern Pennsylvania and began to see incidents, in my personal life, incidents that I had previously misinterpreted, ignored, or explained away, in a new light. Reflecting on my time as a young student, I can still recall instances where teachers were socializing me to a feminine ideal. Having been brought up in a white, middle-class American, suburban, two-parents household, my role as a woman was to be a "good" wife and mother, and whatever needs, interests, or ambitions I might have had would have to come second. It took me years to unpack and discard some of the constricting gendered expectations I had grown up with, and, as a young teacher in Philadelphia, I saw students, both girls and boys, experiencing the same struggles. Instead of valuing students as whole human beings and not gendered stereotypes, society tries to sell the idea that girls' and women's value lies in their youth, beauty, and sexuality, and not in their capacity as leaders. Boys learn that their success is tied to dominance, power, and aggression.

Years later, now working as an elementary school administrator, I advocate for inclusive policies and practices at my school because of the time I have spent developing a more contemporary and complete understanding of gender. Personally, I seek solidarity with the trans community while resisting the hegemony of normative sexuality. According to Marinucci (2016), the concept of straight allies inadvertently drives a wedge between the allies and the communities they aim to support by reinforcing the distinction between those inside and outside the deviant category, so thinking about gaining support for trans communities while simultaneously avoiding this problem involves a distinction between "allies" and "accomplices":

> The risks of an ally who provides support or solidarity (usually on a short term basis) in a fight are much different than that of an accomplice. When we fight back or forward, together, becoming complicit in a struggle towards liberation, we are accomplices. (Indigenous Action Media, p. 88)

Because "allies" often experience the advantages associated with straight privilege and avoid the disadvantages associated with trans oppression (Marinucci, 2016), I seek instead to be considered an "accomplice" of the trans community, and I will continue to forge a deep and lasting solidarity with trans communities by advocating for inclusive policies in all schools, at a local, regional, and national level.

Methods

Participant Selection

The Children

Limited research currently exists about trans elementary school students. Most of the research on trans gender identities has focused on the experiences and perspectives of adults, but the increasing visibility of trans children, as they are identified by their caregivers, presents a

new opportunity to examine how elementary school environments might affect the safety, engagement, and inclusion of students who challenge the gender binary (Rahilly, 2014). This exploratory qualitative study strove to better understand the experiences of trans children (≤ 11 years) who attend elementary schools in the United States. After careful deliberation, I decided not to interview the children, because, even with the best intentions, interviews can reproduce the sense of being scrutinized and rouse unpleasant memories that make children feel uncomfortable or unsafe (Mangin, 2020). Additionally, Mangin (2020) states that "there is a delicate line between giving voice to marginalized people and treating them as objects of curiosity...and this challenge may be exacerbated for children who may not have the language to fully convey their experience (p.12)." Given these considerations, I was not certain that interviews would not pose a risk to the children's emotional well-being, so I decided to focus primarily on the experiences and perceptions of caregivers.

The Caregivers

In a phenomenological research study, participants must be selected from among a homogeneous sample pool of people who "have [similar lived] experience of the phenomenon being studied" (Creswell, 2013, p. 155). Additionally, Smith et al. (2009) stated that "samples are selected purposively (rather than through probability methods) because they can offer a research project insight into a particular experience" (p. 48). In educational programs or research studies, researchers suggest using snowball sampling in order to generate more participants. According to Creswell (2013), snowball sampling "identifies cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich" (p. 158). Additionally, snowball sampling is an approach to participant selection that is especially useful to locate hard-to-access research participants when confidentiality is crucial because of the sensitive topic being studied (Patton,

2015). I selected this approach, since I was seeking access to an inner circle of network connections (caregivers of trans children) to document and understand their children's experiences attending elementary schools. When applying this sampling method, members of the sample group are recruited through chain referral (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). This sampling method is best when a small number of cases can adequately describe the phenomenon under question.

For this study, participants were recruited through Facebook (Meta), the online social networking site (SNS). I shared a Recruitment Message with Facebook group administrators associated with organizations that provide services to, or advocate on behalf of, trans youth. Since confidentiality was critical, I only recruited participants through "closed" groups, which means that administrators have approved requests of nonmembers who desired to join the group. Since group administrators control the content and membership of the group, I requested that these sources share my message with members of the group in an effort to recruit caregivers who met the participation criteria. Additionally, I requested that group administrators encourage their members to send the message to other caregivers who were not members of the group but met the inclusion criteria, including those who did not have Facebook profiles. To be included in the study, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria:

Criterion #1: Participants must be caregivers, 18 years and older, who have parented a trans—having a gender identity that is gender non-binary or transgender—child of 11 years of age or younger within the past five years.

Criterion #2: Their trans child must attend or have previously attended an elementary school in the United States within the past five years.

Criterion #3: Caregivers must indicate a gender-affirmative parenting stance with respect to their trans child (i.e., a nonjudgmental approach that respects and supports the child's gender identity).

A total of 10 caregivers met inclusion criteria and were included in the study.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews

As a qualitative research tradition, a phenomenological approach gives a study the best chance of collecting rich and accurate data, since the focus drives a researcher's analytic attention towards the participant's attempts to make sense of their lived experiences (Smith et. al., 2009). According to Creswell (2013), a phenomenological research study involves the collection of rich and descriptive research data through in-depth interviews with as many as ten individuals. For this study, a standard set of demographic questions were asked of each participant and included items such as caregiver's gender identity and preferred pronouns, child's preferred pronouns, school type (public, public-charter, private-independent, private-religious), and geographic region in which the school is located. A copy of this Qualtrics Demographic Information survey is provided in Appendix A. Completion of the survey took less than 10 minutes for participants to answer the questions. As part of the survey, participants signed up for a time to complete a recorded, semi-structured interview, which, due to the social restrictions imposed during COVID-19, took place via Zoom.

For the semi-structured interviews, specific questions were developed drawing on the literature review and Mangin's (2020) case studies of five elementary schools, which demonstrated the successes and challenges of creating affirming school climates for trans students. The interview protocol (Appendix B) consisted of open-ended questions that explored

caregivers' personal experiences interacting with their children's elementary schools and included initial questions paired with probative follow-up questions designed to invite clarification or further details from the participants. Participants were required to consent to mandatory audio and video recordings of the interviews. The recordings, which were saved to my password-protected computer were simultaneously transcribed through a Zoom recording option. Having the participants' own words helped to elucidate their meaning and ensure the context was understood (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), as well as reinforced my notes about their mood and reaction (based on tone of voice, and how long they took to respond). The duration of the interviews was 45-60 minutes for the initial interview, and member checking and follow-up and/or asking additional questions that arose was accomplished through email.

From these interviews, data was prepared and organized for analysis, then reduced into themes through a process of coding, and identified themes were used to discuss the lived experiences of the participants as a group. The final presentation includes a narrative combined from interview content, using direct quotes as needed to illuminate the important concepts.

Confidentiality and Consent Procedures

The current study design conforms to Institutional Review Board (IRB) human protection requirements including informed consent and confidentiality safeguards. After IRB approval, I sent a Facebook direct message to group administrators associated with organizations that provide services to, or advocate on behalf of, trans youth. In my message (Appendix C), I explained the purpose of my study and asked the group administrators to forward my recruitment message (Appendix D) to their group members. The recruitment email described the purpose of my research, the details of the interviews, and my institutional affiliation and email address. It also included a link to the Qualtrics survey and a link to the consent form (Appendix E).

The greatest risk regarding confidentiality was the participants' and/or their children's identities to be unintentionally disclosed. To address this, no real names of participants and/or their children were collected, nor were the names of the children's schools. In the introduction to the interview, participants were reminded not to use any real names. Any real names that were accidentally disclosed during the interview were changed to pseudonyms. Participants were informed that the results of the study may be published in professional journals or shared in professional conferences; however, identifying information would be excluded.

The Zoom meeting for each interview was password protected and the "waiting room" feature was enabled. The video and audio were recorded during the Zoom interview, and access to the recordings was restricted to my dissertation chair and me. Data was stored on a password-protected computer or in hard copy form (notes from the interview protocols) in a locked personal filing cabinet. Data was never uploaded to the Internet or into any type of remote (cloud) storage. Data will be stored for 3 years after the completion of the study.

Data Analysis

I used procedures for data analysis that came from phenomenological research, and various strategies and methods were used to uncover themes that informed the findings of the research study. The goal of the interviews was to understand the perceptions of caregivers about their trans children's elementary school experiences. I sought to provide a nuanced characterization of trans students' elementary school experiences by eliciting descriptions of positive and negative school factors from their caregivers. A better understanding of these factors may help to identify relevant components of effective school practices for this population. This includes identifying positive factors that should be enhanced and negative factors whose effects

might be ameliorated in service of reducing the challenges faced by trans youth. The coding scheme for this study is delineated in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1

Coding scheme

Features	**Operational Definition(s)**	**Defining Questions/Features**
Inclusive and Supportive Policies	Guidelines that set the standards for which students should be treated, noting what types of behavior are unacceptable, and making students aware of the protections and rights afforded to them (Kosciw et. al., 2019). School policies that address in-school bullying, harassment, and assault are powerful tools for creating school environments where students feel safe (Mangin, 2020).	Does the school have a policy that addresses in-school bullying, harassment, and assault? Does the policy explicitly ate protections based on personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation and gender identity/expression? Does the school have a policy and/or guidelines that addresses use of name/ pronouns in school spaces and on official and/or unofficial records? Does the school have a policy and/or guidelines that addresses gendered spaces (i.e., bathroom, sports, dress codes, locker rooms, field trips)?
Student Safety	Safety refers to the rules and norms associated with students' physical and social/emotional safety (Cohen & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). Hearing anti-LGBTQ remarks in school can contribute to feeling unsafe and create a negative learning environment, and direct experiences with harassment and assault may have even more serious consequences in the lives of students. In 2019, the vast majority of LGBTQ students experienced	Does the caregiver worry about their child's safety at school because of the child's gender identity/expression? Has the child experienced victimization (i.e., hearing biased remarks and/or harassment/assault) based on gender identity/expression?

	harassment or assault based on personal characteristics (Kosciw et. al., 2019).	Has the child missed any school due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable?
Relationships	This terms refers to school connectedness and engagement, social support (school personnel and peers), and leadership. Supportive teachers, principals, and other school personnel serve as an important resource for trans students (Kosciw et. al., 2019). Being able to speak with a caring adult in school may have a significant positive impact on school experiences for students, particularly for those who feel marginalized or have experienced harassment (Kosciw et. al., 2019).	Can the caregiver identify at least one supportive school staff person? How did that show support for the child's gender identity/expression? Does the caregiver describe the principal as "supportive?" Has the caregiver encountered resistance to their child's gender identity/ expression? What messages have caregivers received from school personnel about their children's gender identity/ expression? How to caregivers describe teachers' comfort levels in working with gender diverse students? How do caregivers describe their children's experiences with regard to friends? How do caregivers describe their experiences with the caregivers of their children's friends?
Classroom Practices	Refers to the teacher's behaviors and language, classroom management practices, discussion topics, and/or curricular resources. Students' social-emotional well-being is vital for their academic and life success, and teachers can create classroom	What gendered classroom management strategies has the caregiver witnessed? What gendered classroom management strategies has the child reported having experienced?

	environments where trans students experience affirmation and belonging (Mangin, 2020).	What opportunities has the child had to discuss gender and gender norms at school? In what ways have the children's gender identities and expressions been affirmed at school? What do caregivers report about the perceived presence of gender-expansive play in their children's classrooms? What do caregivers say about their children's access to literature with gender-diverse characters?
Institutional Environment	Refers to the physical and conceptual surroundings, resources, and supplies. Schools are inherently gendered spaces, and tasks that cisgender people take for granted can present obstacles for people whose gender identity or expression differs from their natal sex. Constantly having to navigate binary, cisnormative spaces can exacerbate dysphoria, increase the risk of harassment and bullying, and may result in school avoidance (Mangin, 2020).	What do caregivers say about their children's experiences with gendered spaces (i.e. bathrooms, puberty lessons, dress codes)? Do caregivers describe their children's school spaces as being accessible to a wide range of students?

I transcribed the Zoom recordings then included the handwritten notes from the interview protocols. Then, I implemented Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method to analyze participants' transcripts. The data analysis procedure comprises the following steps (adapted from Colaizzi, 1978; Morrow, Rodriguez & King, 2015; & Abu Sosha, 2012).

1. **Obtain a General Sense of Each Transcript**: Each transcript should be read through several times to obtain a general understanding of the data.

2. **Extract Significant Statements**: Significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon under study should be identified and labeled.

3. **Formulate Meanings**: Meanings should be formulated from the identified significant statements.

4. **Organization of Formulated Meanings into Clusters of Themes and Themes**: Meanings found throughout the data should be clustered and categorized into common themes.

5. **Create Exhaustive Description**: The findings of the study should be written into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study.

6. **Produce Fundamental Structure**: Statement that describes the essential structure of the phenomenon.

7. **Validate Findings**: Present fundamental structure to participants and verify results with their experiences.

Since phenomenological research encourages researchers to "bracket" themselves away from the "lived experiences" of the participants (Creswell, 2013), I described my personal experiences with the phenomenon under study, in an attempt to set aside those experiences, so that the focus could be directed towards the participants in the study. Engaging in bracketing during the data analysis phase assisted me in balancing the tension that existed between bracketing preconceptions and using them as insight (Finlay, 2008). In the current study, I, who

was focusing on the caregivers' perceptions of their trans children's experiences in elementary schools, remained open to hearing participants' views, both positive and negative, but I also examined these views critically, including mine and the participants' social locations and the social structures within which the participants' experiences were situated.

In the study of lived experiences of caregivers of trans children, I personally conducted the interviews, which helped me gain a holistic sense pertaining to the entire experience of the participants. As suggested by Colaizzi (1978), I read the transcripts in their entirety several times to obtain an overall feeling for them, while attempting to comprehend the thought processes and the feelings of the participants. I then made notes of short phrases, ideas, and/or key concepts that occurred to me, and meanings were formulated from the significant statements and phrases. These statements were written separately for each participant and coded as transcript page number and line number. Table 3.2 illustrates some of the statements that were taken from the interviews. The information in the table was shared with a peer group member for checking to abstain clarity of thoughts, and suggestions were incorporated.

I expanded the categories as I continued to review the data. The categories were clustered into themes, allowing for the emergence of themes common to all of the participants' transcripts. The results were integrated into an in-depth, exhaustive description of the phenomenon, which described "what" the participants experienced (*textural description*) with the phenomenon and "how" they experienced it (*structural description*) (Creswell, 2013). After descriptions and themes were obtained, I contacted some of the participants a second time via email to validate the findings. New data that emerged were included in the final description, which conveys the *essence* of participants' experiences.

Validation Strategies

Validity is concerned with whether the research is believable and true and whether it is evaluating what it purports to evaluate. Burns (1999) stresses that "validity is an essential criterion for evaluating the quality and acceptability of research" (p. 160). For the current study, data validation was facilitated through the use of accepted strategies, including peer debriefing, thick description, member checks, and the use of reflective and analytic memos to document the "accuracy" of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Peer Debriefing

According to Guba and Lincoln (1985), peer debriefing provides an external check of the research process through extensive discussions with a "disinterested peer," who "asks hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations" (p. 237). In this study, the semistructured interview techniques aligned with the recommendations from Brenner (2006), including strict confidentiality for participants and sequencing of questions from recall and descriptive queries to more interpretive and feelings-based inquiries. All interviews were audio and video recorded and transcribed verbatim. All research data and findings were subject to peer evaluations. For this study, I had a critical friend review the findings and established codes and provide feedback.

Thick Description

Thick description is described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a way of achieving a type of external validity. By describing a phenomenon in sufficient detail, one can begin to evaluate

the extent to which the conclusions drawn are transferable to other times, settings, situations, and people. Denzin's (1989) conceptualization of thick description guided me in effectively communicating the methods and results of my qualitative research.

> A thick description does more than record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and self-feelings. It inserts history into experience. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard. (Denzin, 1989, p. 83)

According to Stake (2010), thick description provides direct connection to cultural theory and scientific knowledge. In the present study, I used thick description by providing an abundance of details about the study in order to determine a connection to the cultural theories of heteronormativity and the research regarding trans students' experiences in elementary schools.

Member Checks

In order to ensure accurate understanding of the participants' responses, member checking and follow-up and/or asking additional questions that arose was accomplished through email. This member checking provided participants with the opportunity to concur with the ideas being represented by the researcher (Mills, 2003). If the participant concurs, this is seen as an indication of the validity of my interpretation. For example, participants were invited to respond to my interpretations and/or questions from the interview transcripts and clarify or elaborate on any statements they made.

Reflective and Analytic Memos

Finally, I clarified biases from the outset of the study, so that the reader understands my position and any biases or assumptions that could have impacted the inquiry (Merriam, 1988). Throughout the data collection process, I developed memos. Through the writing of memos, I ensured that data collection was integrated with reflection and analysis (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Some of the questions that I addressed through memos included: (1) What questions should I be asking to follow this inquiry? (2) Why do I think this particular incident occurred? (3) Do I need to change any of my questions in the interview protocol in order to more effectively answer my research questions? Additionally, the memos served as an outlet for clarifying ideas and exploring the following aspects: (1) my reason for undertaking the research; (2) my personal value system; (3) my own assumptions regarding gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status; and (4) my place in the power hierarchy of the research (Hanson, 1994).

Limitations

Despite a robust study design, perhaps the greatest limitation of the present study is the applicability, or generalizability, of the findings to other settings with other participants. Although I attempted to sample for variation, selecting participants who represented the variety of legal, political, and educational contexts of trans students attending elementary schools in the U.S., I must also acknowledge that recruiting through online advocacy organizations most likely resulted in selection bias. The demographic profile of participants was representative of caregivers that would be best equipped and have ample resources to support their trans child. Additionally, as part of the sampling criteria, the caregivers must have characterized themselves

as being supportive of their children's gender identities. As a result, findings may not generalize to other populations where caregivers do not support their trans children. This limitation might illuminate wider cultural trends in child rearing that are inflected by race, class, and gender. Despite the potential limited demographic profile of participants, I firmly believe that the information gleaned from even one person can inform others about the experiences of trans students in elementary schools. Additionally, the in depth interviews were performed on a relatively new and understudied population, and their stories have the potential to inform and empower others to action.

A second limitation that merits mention is that the results will be drawn from participants' self-reports, which may be partial representations or not reflect the experiences of other caregivers and their children.

Time Frame

After acceptance of the proposal of the current study, I applied for IRB approval in December, 2021. After IRB approval, I sent direct messages to Facebook group administrators and requested that they share the recruitment email with their members in January, 2022. Interviews began in late-January and continued through June, 2022. Initially, I had a parent contact who had agreed to assist in my recruitment efforts. Sadly, she passed away before I reached this stage of the study. As a result, it took more time to recruit the number of participants I sought. This was due, in part, because, as a cisgender woman who is not the caregiver of a trans child, I am an "outsider" to the population I sought to study, so I had to go through several rigorous vetting processes to be admitted to the Facebook groups and be able to share my

recruitment message with the members. I began the data analysis stage of the study in July, 2022. The final report and defense took place in September, 2022.

CHAPTER FOUR

Data Analysis and Results

Introduction

Most of the research on trans gender identities has focused on the experiences and perspectives of adults, but the increasing visibility of trans children, as they are identified by their caregivers, presents a new opportunity to examine how elementary school environments might affect the safety, engagement, and inclusion of students who challenge the gender binary (Rahilly, 2014). Utilizing a phenomenological approach, I developed the present qualitative study to gain a better understanding of caregivers' perceptions of their trans children's experiences in elementary schools in the United States. The remote research purpose was to identify supportive characteristics of school climates that should be enhanced and unsupportive characteristics whose effects might be ameliorated in service of reducing the challenges faced by trans youth. To successfully develop the required strategies, more knowledge is needed about the current climates in elementary schools, as they pertain to trans students. Therefore, the immediate goal of this study was to seek input from caregivers about their experiences in the caregiving role of a trans student as they interacted with their children's elementary schools. The caregivers' stories illuminate both the successes and challenges of school environments for trans students. In addition, I examined the perceived availability of resources and supports in school for trans students (e.g., Gay-Straight or Gender and Sexuality Alliances, anti-bullying/harassment and transgender and gender expansive student policies, supportive school staff, and curricular resources that are inclusive of LGBTQIA+-related topics).

The questions guiding this research were:

1. What are caregiver's perceptions of their trans children's elementary school experiences?

2. What do caregivers describe as the supportive and unsupportive characteristics of their children's elementary schools?

For the purpose of this study, *trans* refers to the "spectrum of individuals whose gender identities do not align with cisnormative expectations for the gender assigned to them at birth, or the expectations associated with that gender" (Stryker, 2008), and includes both the terms *binary* and *nonbinary trans*. Stryker (2008) defines *binary trans* as a trans person with a binary identity (i.e., "man" or "woman") and *nonbinary trans* as an individual who identifies as an alternative gender that lies outside the gender binary altogether (i.e., "gender expansive," "gender fluid," and "genderqueer).

Methods

The goal of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to better understand caregivers' perceptions of their trans children's experiences in elementary schools in order to deepen educational professionals' understandings about *why* they need to make schools gender inclusive and *how* they might make it happen. In order to learn about participants' lived experiences, I employed the use of semi-structured interviews to learn more about caregivers' attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and perceptions.

Participants. All names and personal information has been protected for confidentiality purposes. Participants were recruited through Facebook (Meta), the online social networking site (SNS). "Facebook's size, popularity, and features make it the preferred SNS for constructing a snowball sample in the United States" (Bhutta, 2012). According to Bhutta (2012), "online social networking sites offer new ways for researchers to conduct studies quickly, cheaply, and single-handedly —especially when seeking to construct "snowball" samples for exploratory work" (p. 57). After IRB approval, I sent a Facebook direct message to group administrators

associated with organizations that provide services to, or advocate on behalf of, trans youth. In my message (See Appendix C), I explained the purpose of this study. Since group administrators control the content and the membership of the group, I requested that these sources share my recruitment message (See Appendix D) with members of the group in an effort to recruit caregivers who meet the participant criteria. The recruitment message described the purpose of my research and included a link to the Qualtrics survey where participants completed a demographic information survey and signed up for a time to complete the 45-60 minute semi-structured, recorded interview. The survey also contained a link to the consent form (See Appendix E). The consent language appeared as the first page of the survey, and participants clicked either "yes" or "no" to the consent statement. Those who clicked "yes" proceeded to the survey, and those who clicked "no" were sent to an exit page.

Additionally, I requested that group administrators encourage their members to send the message to other caregivers who are not members of the group but meet the inclusion criteria, including those who do not have Facebook profiles. Since confidentiality was critical because of the sensitive topic being studied, I only recruited participants through "closed" groups, which means that administrators had approved requests of nonmembers who desired to join the group. Additionally, a "closed" group inspires trust within its members, so it's easier for them to engage freely in conversations knowing that only immediate members can see, rather than the entire Facebook audience (Bhutta, 2012). To be included in the study, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria:

> Criterion #1: Participants must be caregivers, 18 years and older, who have parented a trans—having a gender identity that is gender non-binary or transgender—child of 11 years of age or younger within the past five years.

Criterion #2: Their trans child must attend or have previously attended an elementary school in the United States within the past five years.

Criterion #3: Caregivers must indicate a gender-affirmative parenting stance with respect to their trans child (i.e. a nonjudgmental approach that respects and supports the child's gender identity).

To begin the study, participants completed a Qualtrics Demographic Information Survey (See Appendix A), which asked a series of standard demographic questions, including caregivers' gender identity and pronouns, child's gender identity and pronouns, school type (i.e., public, public-charter, private-independent, private-religious), and geographic region in which the school is located. Completion of the survey took less than 10 minutes for participants to answer the questions. As part of the survey, participants signed up for a time to complete a recorded, semi-structured interview, which, due to the social restrictions imposed during COVID-19, took place via Zoom.

I initially received a total of 24 responses. After reviewing the data, 14 survey responses were eliminated from the study due to participants not fully consenting to the study. Results presented in this chapter include a total of 10 participants who met all of the requirements to participate in the study. Each of the 10 participants was given a pseudonym for all notes and transcripts. What follows is a brief description of the caregivers and their children and basic demographic information about their elementary school settings.

Lane (she, they) is the birth parent of AJ, a gender-fluid child who uses the pronouns they/them. They live in the Pacific Coastal region of the United States, and AJ attends a public suburban K-5 elementary school. Lane and AJ are both White (non-Latinx), and their yearly household income was reported to be between $10,000 and $19,000.

EB (he/him) is the biological father of Kam, a gender non-binary child who uses the pronouns they/them. They live with Kam's mother and younger sister in the Pacific Coastal region of the United States, and Kam attends a public suburban K-6 elementary school. EB and Kam are both White, and their yearly household income was reported to be over $150,000.

Emma (she,her) is the biological mother of Riley, a trans child who uses the pronouns he/they. Emma is White, and Riley is multiracial. They live with Riley's father, maternal grandparents, and younger sister in the Pacific Coastal region of the United States. At the time of the study Riley attended a PreK-8 Catholic school. He now attends the local public school. Their reported yearly household income is between $100,000 and $149,999.

Eka (they/them) is the biological mother of Zoey, of a gender-expansive child who uses the pronouns she/her. They live with Zoey's father in the Midwest region of the United States, where Eka's child attends a public-suburban elementary school. Eka and Zoey are White (non-Latinx), and their reported yearly household income is between $100,000 and $149,999.

Linde (she, her) is the biological mother of June, a gender non-binary child who uses the pronouns they/them. Linde and June live in the Midwest region of the United States with June's father and younger sibling, and June attends a 2-5 public suburban elementary school. Linde and June are White (non-Latinx), and their yearly household income was reported to be between $50,000 and $99,999.

Alan (he/him) is the biological father of a trans child who uses the pronouns he/him. Alan, his wife, and his child live in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, where his child attends a public urban K-8 elementary school.

Andrea (she, her) is the biological mother of Naomi, a trans child who uses the pronouns he/him. Andrea and Naomi live in the Pacific Coastal region of the United States with Naomi's

father, and Naomi attends a public suburban K-5 elementary school. Andrea and Naomi are White (non-Latinx), and their yearly household income was reported to be more than $150,000.

Christina (she/her) is the caregiver of a gender non-binary child who uses the pronouns they/he. Christina is a single mother who lives with her child in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Her child attends a public urban PreK-8 elementary school.

Maggie (she/her) is the biological mother of Oliver, a demi-boy who uses the pronouns he/him or they/them. Maggie and Oliver live in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States with Oliver's father and younger sibling. At the time of the study Oliver attended a public suburban K-5 elementary school. Maggie and Oliver are White (non-Latinx), and their yearly household income was reported to be more than $150,000.

Fiona (she/her) is the biological mother of Riley, a gender non-binary child who uses the pronouns they/them. Fiona and Riley live with Riley's father, older sister, and younger sister in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Riley attends a public suburban K-5 elementary school. Fiona and Riley are White (non-Latinx), and their yearly household income was reported to be more than $150,000.

Of 10 participants, 6 identify as cisgender women and use the pronouns she/her. 2 of the participants identify as cisgender males and use the pronouns he/him. 1 participant identifies as gender-fluid and uses she/they pronouns, and 1 participant identifies as agender and uses the pronouns they/them. Six of the participants are the children's biological mothers, 2 are biological fathers, and 1 participant uses the term "birth parent" to describe her relationship to her child. Table 4.1 contains the characteristics of the participants and their children.

Table 4.1
Study Participants

	Participant's Gender Identity	*Participant's Pronouns*	*Term(s) Used to Describe Child's Gender Identity*	*Child's Pronouns*
(A) Lane	Gender-fluid	she, they	Gender-fluid, Gender-diverse	they, them
(B) EB	Male	he, him	Gender non-binary	they, them
(C) Emma	Cis	she, her	Trans	he, they
(D) Eka	Agender	they, them	Gender-expansive	she, her
(E) Linde	Cisgender woman	she, her	Gender non-binary	they, them
(F) Alan	Cis male	he, him	Trans	he, him
(G) Andrea	Cisgender woman	she, her	Trans	he, him
(H) Christina	Cisgender woman	she, her	Gender non-binary	they, he
(I) Maggie	Female	she, her	Demi-boy	he/him or they/them
(J) Fiona	Cisgender woman	she, her	Gender non-binary	they, them

Of the 10 participants, 4 live in the Pacific Coastal region, 4 live in the Mid-Atlantic region, and 2 live in the Midwest region of the United States. 7 of the children attend public suburban elementary schools, 2 children attend public urban elementary schools, and 1 child attended a private-religious school at the time of the study. Table 4.2 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the children's schools.

Table 4.2
School Demographics

	Geographic Region	*Type of School*	*Urban, Suburban, or Rural*	*Grades*
(A) Lane	Pacific Coastal	Public	Suburban	K-5
(B) EB	Pacific Coastal	Public	Suburban	K-6
(C) Emma	Pacific Coastal	Private-religious	Suburban	Pk-8
(D) Eka	Midwest	Public	Suburban	K-5
(E) Linde	Midwest	Public	Suburban	2-5
(F) Alan	Mid-Atlantic	Public	Urban	K-8
(G) Andrea	Pacific Coastal	Public	Suburban	K-5
(H) Christina	Mid-Atlantic	Public	Urban	Pk-8
(I) Maggie	Mid-Atlantic	Public	Suburban	K-5
(J) Fiona	Mid-Atlantic	Public	Suburban	K-5

***Semi-structured interviews*.** For the semi-structured interviews, specific questions were developed drawing on the literature review and Mangin's (2020) case studies of five elementary schools, which demonstrated the successes and challenges of creating affirming school climates for trans students. The interview protocol (See Appendix B) consisted of open-ended questions that explored caregivers' personal experiences interacting with their children's elementary schools and included initial questions paired with probative follow-up questions designed to invite clarification or further details from the participants. Questions included some of the following: (a) At what age did your child begin to socially transition at school? (b) What was that like? (c) Who was the most supportive and how did that person show support? (d) Were you

worried about your child's safety at school because of their gender identity? (e) Are there specific events related to safety that stand out in your mind? (f) What advice do you have for schools who want to help and support children like yours?

I began each interview by reiterating the informed consent. First, participants were re-informed of my role and the purpose of this study before I asked for verbal consent. In the introduction to the interview, I also reminded participants not to use any real names (i.e., child, school, etc.). I informed participants that any names that were accidentally disclosed during the interview would be changed to pseudonyms when the recording was transcribed. I also explicitly reminded the participants that minors were not permitted to participate in the study and asked them to give a verbal acknowledgement that their child was not present at the time of or in the vicinity of the Zoom interview. Then, when participants consented, I indicated that I would be recording the audio and video of our interview and taking notes, and I reiterated the option to withdraw from the study at any time until a week after their interview was completed. The recordings, which were saved to my password-protected computer were simultaneously transcribed through a Zoom recording option. Having the participants' own words helped to elucidate their meaning and ensure the context was understood (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), as well as reinforced my notes about their mood and reaction (based on tone of voice, and how long they took to respond). The duration of the interviews was 45-60 minutes for the initial interview, and member checking and follow-up and/or asking additional questions that arose was accomplished through email.

Data Analysis

I used procedures for data analysis that came from phenomenological research, and various strategies and methods were used to uncover themes that informed the findings of the

research study. The goal of the interviews was to understand the perceptions of caregivers about their trans children's elementary school experiences. I sought to provide a nuanced characterization of trans students' elementary school experiences by eliciting descriptions of positive and negative school factors from their caregivers. A better understanding of these factors may help to identify relevant components of effective school practices for this population. This includes identifying positive factors that should be enhanced and negative factors whose effects might be ameliorated in service of reducing the challenges faced by trans youth. Based on existing literature, I developed a coding scheme to use during data analysis, which included the following themes: (a) inclusive and supportive policies, (b) student safety, (c) relationships, (d) classroom practices, and (e) institutional environment.

I employed Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method in analyzing participants' transcripts. This data analysis procedure comprises the following steps (adapted from Colaizzi, 1978; Morrow, Rodriguez & King, 2015; & Abu Sosha, 2012).

1. **Obtain a General Sense of Each Transcript**: Each transcript should be read through several times to obtain a general understanding of the data.

2. **Extract Significant Statements**: Significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon under study should be identified and labeled.

3. **Formulate Meanings**: Meanings should be formulated from the identified significant statements.

4. **Organization of Formulated Meanings into Clusters of Themes and Themes**: Meanings found throughout the data should be clustered and categorized into common themes.

5. **Create Exhaustive Description**: The findings of the study should be written into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study.

6. **Produce Fundamental Structure**: Statement that describes the essential structure of the phenomenon.

7. **Validate Findings**: Present fundamental structure to participants and verify results with their experiences.

I read the transcripts several times to get an overall feeling for them. From each transcript, I identified significant phrases that pertain directly to the lived experience of caregivers of trans children. Next, I formulated meanings from the significant statements and phrases and clustered them into themes, which allowed for the emergence of themes common to all of the participants/ transcripts. Then, I integrated the results into an in-depth, exhaustive description of the phenomenon. Once I obtained the description and themes, I approached some participants a second time to validate the findings. This was accomplished through email. Any relevant data that emerged were included in the final description. The final description includes a narrative combined from interview content, using direct quotes as needed to illuminate the important concepts.

Methodological rigor was attained through a number of validation strategies. Validity is concerned with whether the research is believable and true and whether it is evaluating what it purports to evaluate. Burns (1999) stresses that "validity is an essential criterion for evaluating the quality and acceptability of research" (p. 160). For the current study, data validation was facilitated through the use of accepted strategies, including peer debriefing, thick description, member checks, and the use of reflective and analytic memos to document the "accuracy" of the study (Creswell, 2013).

Results

From the 10 verbatim transcripts, I extracted 195 significant statements. Table 4.3 includes examples of significant statements with their formulated meanings. Next, I arranged the formulated meanings into clusters, which resulted in 9 phenomenological themes. 5 of the identified themes echoed the themes from the existing literature. They include the following: (a) institutional environment, (b) classroom practices, (c) gender policing (student safety), (d) the role of supportive people in the school community (relationships), and (e) the effects of formal policies (inclusive and supportive policies). Additionally, 4 new themes emerged from the data. They include the following: (a) professional development for teachers, (b) a position of responsibility and vulnerability, (c) resistance to diverse gender identities, and (d) the effects of the political landscape on trans students' rights. Table 4.4 contains an example of theme clusters that emerged from their associated meanings.

Table 4.3
Selected Examples of Significant Statements of Caregivers and Related Formulated Meanings

Significant Statement	*Formulated Meaning*
They started saying, "I feel weird going into the girls bathroom because the kids who don't know me look at me funny, but I don't really want to go into the boys bathroom, because my friends know I'm not really a boy."	Binary, cisnormative spaces exclude and stigmatize trans students.
My feeling is that it's less of an issue for the kids. You know the kids will say, "That's weird. You want me to treat you like a boy now? Okay, let's play." They'll continue misgendering, but they don't care about the reasons why, and the more exposure they have they improve. They'll start to get the gender correct or the name correct, and that's encouraging.	Conversations specifically about gender can build awareness and refute negative gender stereotypes.
Early on in the school year my child was exploring different names. And so, before	Educators/schools can affirm children's gender identities by using children's chosen

they settled on the name that they're using now, they asked the music teacher privately. And the music teacher did, and I didn't get any letters like, "What is this all about?" They just did it. They just trusted that my child knew what they were asking for, and they supported them in that."	names and pronouns without requiring "proof" or legal documentation.
Yes [school has a policy]. It's progressive and supports kids. Kids can use the bathroom of the gender they identify with. Our principal didn't even know it existed.	Formal policies that lack opportunities for learning are unlikely to produce meaningful changes to practice or beliefs.

Table 4.4
Selected Example of a Theme Cluster

Theme: Professional Development for Teachers
"Teachers are on the front lines with that kind of stuff [reading literature about different types of families] and they just want to say and do the right thing, and they don't always have the information they need, and, as a result, they say to kids, 'oh, we're just not going to talk about that,' when kids ask questions."
"People sometimes need very concrete guidance. With teachers, talk about, 'Okay, instead of using boys and girls here's other alternatives.'"
"He [the teacher] doesn't really know how to use they/them pronouns. Everytime he refers to my child, he uses both they and them. He writes they/them every time"
"Training for teachers about gender expansive kids period. There's just so much out there, and we have to be comfortable asking questions about things we don't know about, and there has to be a space for that to happen. You don't want to be scrambling, because now you've got a kid in front of you. You want to be ready to teach any kid that comes down the path."
"I think there's room for improvement. I think there could be more training given to teachers on better use of pronouns, and different gender identities."
"Also overcoming misconceptions, like so many people have. I've actually heard a public school administrator talk about young trans kids at her school [7 years old], and she was convinced that it was too young. So again more awareness and representation needs to be encouraged."
"I've only had three meetings with the teacher…in those conversations, he can't gender my child. When he talks about her he stumbles through all the pronoun choices and just picks one. He's clearly deeply confused about my situation, so he just calls me 'Mama,' which I hate."
"I think that's the fear- that somehow we will be talking about sex with elementary school

kids.”
“We’re talking about my child’s gender identity, which is separate from whether they’re gay or straight.”

Research question #1. What are caregiver’s perceptions of their trans children’s elementary school experiences?

In each of the 10 interviews that I conducted, themes around caregivers’ perceptions of their trans children’s elementary school experiences emerged. The three themes include the following: (a) institutional environment, (b) classroom practices, and (c) gender policing.

Theme #1: Institutional Environment

An overarching theme that caregivers reported was that gender plays a large role in their children’s elementary school experiences, physically and conceptually. From the clothes they wear, to the toys they are offered, to the way they are seated or asked to line up, students are constantly immersed in the enduring gender binary that presents itself in schools.

Institutional Reinforcement of Cisnormativity. Regarding school-sponsored programs, events, and activities, caregivers reported that their children’s schools reinforced and reproduced cisnormative views of gender in a number of ways. One participant, Linde, reported that her June’s school perpetuates cisnormative ideals through one of their popular school-sponsored events, *“They still do the daddy/daughter dance- that’s kind of a big thing around here.”* Another participant, Eka, said the following about Zoey's public, suburban school’s sports program, “*Why, in 4th grade, do we have boys’ basketball and girls' basketball? Why don’t we just have three levels of basketball- beginner, intermediate, and advanced- and you play on the one that makes sense for you?”* A third participant, Maggie, said the following about her Oliver’s experience on a school-sanctioned field trip: “*They did a class field trip to a cultural recreation site, and that was very gendered. When he came home from that he was like, ‘The field trip was*

awful! They made all the girls grind corn and the men do this'…and they had some kind of wedding ceremony with a boy and a girl. We heard all about that." These remarks from the participants signify that gender is infused into school traditions in a way that reinforces gender norms.

Organizing Students by Binary Genders. Additionally, participants discussed ways in which gender continues to be a common way to categorize, sort, and define children. For example, it is not unusual for schools to formally sanction gendered attire in the form of school uniforms, or clothing required for school performances and events. As one participant, Christina, noted, "*There was a performance the kids were doing in pre-K, and the boys were supposed to wear this, and girls were supposed to wear that…and it was very gendered, like, 'Girls will wear a skirt, and boys will wear pants*.'" Regarding uniforms, one participant, Alan, reported that students at his child's school wore khaki pants and a collared shirt, regardless of gender, but he also said the following: "*The uniforms are somewhat gender neutral, except for someone who might want to be identified by others as male who might want to wear something that is more typically female. I haven't seen that pushed or the space for that."* Another participant, Emma, shared a similar comment, "*There was another student at the school who identifies as a girl but was not allowed to wear a skirt, because of her assigned sex at birth. So the uniform policy permits girls to wear shorts but not boys to wear dresses.*"

Gender Markers in Written Policy, Documents, and Communication. In addition, two participants brought up the fact that gender markers appear on school forms, students' email and technology accounts, and on standardized tests. In both cases, the schools affirmed the children's gender identities by using the children's chosen names and pronouns without requiring "proof" or legal documentation. Maggie said the following about her experience: "*I was thinking that the school forms would be a big deal, and someone, through one of the parent groups, was*

like, 'No, you just go online and fill out a form.' Within 24 hours his digital login and all of that stuff had changed. The PSSA booklet still had his dead name on it, but anything hooked up to the school system changed immediately after I put that form in." The other participant, Fiona, had a similarly positive response from Riley's school: *"They were complaining that when they log in at school to any of the Google classroom stuff, it still says their old name, so I emailed the guidance counselor and asked for it to be changed. It was done in three days. They changed it in Powerschool."*

Gendered School Spaces. Perhaps the most visible cisnormative school space is the bathroom, and participants shared their children's distress regarding the use of the bathrooms that were designated for either boys or girls. One participant, Emma, is parenting a trans child who attends a private, religious school in the Pacific Coastal region of the United States. Her child's school approached the bathroom situation by attempting to identify an alternate bathroom, in this case a teacher's bathroom, for Riley to use. Emma commented, "*My child would like to use the boys' bathroom and feels uncomfortable going into the girls' bathroom. He doesn't want to use the teachers' bathroom, because I think that would be awkward and also it's farther away.*" Similarly, Eka's gender-expansive child's school, a public, suburban school in the Midwest region of the United States, also attempted to identify an alternate bathroom for her to use. Eka shared the following regarding their conversation with the personnel at their Zoey's school:

> "*I was like, 'Well she'll use the boys' bathroom, if that's how she's feeling.' And they were like, 'Well, there's a bathroom in the nurse's office she can use'…they were naming all of their other non-gender bathrooms. So I was like, 'Are you saying that she can't use the boys' bathroom?' (which is not legal in the state), and they were like, 'no, no, like, of course…but just for safety.' And I was like, 'Well, aren't there just gonna be other 7-year old boys in there? What would happen?*"

Lane, whose gender-fluid child attends a public, suburban school in the Pacific Coastal region of the United States, was worried that AJ was intentionally avoiding the bathroom all day,

"*My kid comes home and the first thing they have to do is go to the bathroom, so it's like, 'Are you holding it all day because you don't want to go into the girls' bathroom or you're not allowed to use the boys' bathroom?'*" These remarks indicate that trans students often lack access to appropriate facilities, which is of concern, since lack of access to school bathrooms can result in toileting accidents, urinary tract infections, and school avoidance (Mangin, 2020). On the other hand, Alan's child's school, which is a public, urban school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, modified the traditionally gendered bathrooms so that his trans child was not required to adapt to a binary, cisnormative space. Alan noted, *"In my child's case that [gendered bathrooms] wasn't much of an issue, because his class is adjacent to another second grade class, and they have a space between the classroom where there are non-gendered bathrooms."* It is evident from the remarks above that schools need to make gendered spaces, particularly bathrooms, more comfortable for a wider range of students.

Theme #2: Classroom Practices

A second overarching theme that caregivers reported was how teachers directly influenced their children's school experiences through their classroom practices and interactions.

Use of Language and Pronouns. Regarding teachers' use of the correct names/pronouns, one participant shared, "*He [the teacher] doesn't really know how to use they/them pronouns. Everytime he refers to my child, he uses both 'they' and 'them'. He writes 'they/them' every time*." A second participant, who identifies as "agender" describes their experiences with their child's teacher:

> *I've only had three meetings with the teacher…in those conversations, he can't gender my child. When he talks about her he stumbles through all the pronoun choices and just picks one. He's clearly deeply confused about my situation, so he just calls me 'Mama,' which I hate.*

Lane described how AJ's music teacher affirmed their gender identity by using the child's

names and pronouns without requiring "proof" of legal documentation:

> "*Early on in the school year my child was exploring different names. And so, before they settled on the name that they're using now, they asked the music teacher privately. And the music teacher did, and I didn't get any letters like, 'What is this all about?' The teacher just did it. The teacher just trusted that my child knew what they were asking for, and the teacher supported them in that.*"

Alternatively, one of AJ's other teachers continuously misgendered them, which affected their educational experience. Lane noted, "*The teacher would constantly refer to my child as 'she' and 'her' and then question why my child was not participating in class.* "

Organizing Students by Binary Genders. In addition, when asked about gendered management strategies, participants reported hearing about and/or personally experiencing the gendered practice of using gender to sort and/or organize students. At Eka's child's school, "*He [the teacher] seated the kids boy, girl, boy, girl, because the boys were talking too much."* Linde shared, *"In gym class they are separated into boys and girls."* At Christina's child's school, "*Teachers line up boys and girls.*" Fiona shared that she was on a field trip with Riley, and one of the teachers, "*was constantly, 'Boys and girls, boys and girls*.'" Maggie shared the following comment, which illuminates how binary gender terms can cause distress or exclusion for some students, as students who identify outside the gender binary are explicitly excluded: *"He definitely reports to us when it's boys and girls in separate lines. And, at school, he says, 'What about all of the non-binary kids? Where do we go?'*" Lane reports similar feelings of exclusion regarding AJ, "*They refer to students as two distinct groups- girls and boys- and it's like, 'Okay, so where does my kid fit?'"* These results indicate that teachers' language may be the most explicitly gendered practice at elementary schools.

Formal Curriculum and/or Informal Discussions About Gender. Research suggests that trans students' experiences may be shaped by the inclusion of trans-related information in

the curriculum. Learning about LGBTQIA+ historical events and positive role models may enhance LGBTQIA+ students' engagement in their schools and provide valuable information about the LGBTQIA+ community (GLSEN, 2020). Therefore, in addition to language and classroom management, participants were asked whether their children had been exposed to representations of LGBTQIA+ people, history, or events in lessons at school, and all of the participants reported that their children's schools did not, to their knowledge, include these topics in the formal curriculum. Participants were also asked about their children's opportunities to discuss gender and/or gender norms at school, since research suggests that having conversations specifically about gender can build awareness and refute negative gender stereotypes. Maggie noted, "*In our class the teacher has been facilitating conversations about gender, especially right after my kid came out*." However, in another school, the teacher's conversations with students were more vague and nonspecific. Emma shared, "*Teachers had a couple of talks about being respectful of other people's differences and being polite*."

Literature with Gender-Diverse Characters and Themes. Participants in this study felt strongly that schools should increase gender-related discussions and use literature as a doorway to those conversations. Emma shared, "*Schools should consider representation through books or programs that depict kids across the gender spectrum…also being willing to talk about it, normalize it*." Eka described how teachers can legitimize and validate trans identities by making books available to children. Regarding the librarian at Zoey's school, "*The librarian picked out some books for my child that were about gender and gave them to her privately, rather than in front of the class, which was really nice*." In some cases participants questioned the extent to which books, though physically present in the classrooms and schools, were actually being used to facilitate conversations about gender. Maggie noted, "*I think that any administrator from the*

school would point you to a Morning Meeting and the SEL conversations and say that that's where conversations are happening, but I don't think that they're reading books that are diverse in that [gender] way. I know that there are some in the library, because my kid has brought them home."

Theme #3: Gender Policing

Participants were asked to share any fears they had regarding their child's privacy and/or safety at school. Specifically, they were asked the following questions: (1) *Were you worried about your child's safety at school because of your child's gender identity?* and (2) *Are there any specific events related to your child's safety at school that stand out in your mind?* A third overarching theme- gender policing- emerged as participants described situations in which their trans children were met with high levels of intolerance and, in some cases, become the targets of discrimination and bullying. Payne and Smith (2016) define gender policing as "the social process of enforcing cultural expectations for 'normal' masculine and feminine expression" (p. 129). Alan, whose trans child was in second grade at the time, said, "*He has had some bullying incidents where he was on the receiving end of bullying…in one of them gender was used as ammunition…it was with a kid from a different grade…he was told that he wasn't allowed to be a boy, that he was a girl*." Lane, whose gender-fluid child, AJ, was also in second grade at the time, shared a similar experience. She explained, "*One night before bed they shared that the girls were picking on them and saying things like, 'Oh, well, you're not a real girl, because you don't wear dresses.'"* Then, when AJ was 9 and socially transitioning at school, she described another incident. She shared, "*There have been a couple of instances where my kid has been pushed, or other kids would say things like, 'Oh, well if you're a boy, then they should take their shirt off*." Emma's trans child, Riley, who was 11 at the time, experienced similar remarks from a

classmate. Emma commented, "*There were some issues with another child going up to my kid and saying, 'Are you a boy or a girl?*'" When Chistina's non-binary child was in second grade, they were called a "*third gender"* by another student, and Eka's gender-expansive child, Zoey, had difficulties using the bathroom at school. Eka shared, "*Once I made it clear that I was confident that she could handle that, they were okay with it, but I also know that she never felt comfortable doing it [using the boys' bathroom]…the other boys told her that she couldn't.*" And the resistance to Eka's child's identity persisted. Eka explained, "*My child was like, 'I don't have any friends. Boys say I'm not a boy, and girls don't want to play with me either."*

These results indicate that, while adults often question whether gender is an appropriate topic in elementary schools, gender is already a pervasive component of schooling. One participant shared the following, *"My feeling is that it's less of an issue for the kids. You know the kids will say, 'That's weird. You want me to treat you like a boy now? Okay, let's play.' They'll continue misgendering, but they don't care about the reasons why, and the more exposure they have they improve. They'll start to get the gender correct or the name correct, and that's encouraging."* Other comments included the following: *"Kids are naturally curious. They don't have negative stereotypes about gender", "It doesn't seem like the kids particularly care. They might think it's weird and might wonder, 'Are we gonna play differently, or are we gonna do stuff differently?' and, for the most part they're not. Slowly, they're trying to get pronouns right", "The kids are fine. Explain to them the best you can, but the kids have moved on. It's us [the adults] who are a bit stuck", and "They would just say [when asked why they use they/them pronouns that they don't really feel like a boy or a girl. And the other kid would be like, 'Oh, okay.' It's generally not been an issue with the other kids at school."* Additionally, participants caution school personnel to pay attention during unstructured times too: *"There is not any sort of*

organization to recess, so kids fall into very gendered play. And free play is important, but also, sometimes we need some structure from adults who understand that we're falling into a common bias that we don't need to have."

Research question #2. What do caregivers describe as the supportive and unsupportive characteristics of their children's elementary schools?

In each of the 10 interviews that I conducted, themes around how caregivers described the supportive and unsupportive characteristics of their children's schools emerged. The 6 themes include the following: (d) the role of supportive people in the school community, (e) professional development for teachers, (f) a position of responsibility and vulnerability, (g) the effects of formal policies, (h) resistance to diverse gender identities, and (i) the effects of the political landscape on trans students' rights

Theme #4: The Role of Supportive Adults and Fellow Students in the School Community

School Personnel. The presence of caring adults and the positive impacts those adults had on participants' trans children became an emerging theme as participants described the supportive characteristics of their children's elementary schools. Teachers, counselors, and school psychologists were identified by caregivers as being the most supportive personnel in their children's schools. Participants reported that the counselors facilitated many of the gender support plan meetings, developed safety plans, and provided specific strategies to the classroom teachers. Alan explained:

> *We just continued to be surprised and impressed by the effort and thought shown by the school. The meeting went well. My child was in the meeting with us. He got to say what he felt comfortable saying. He was probably a little nervous but clear enough. The teachers had already started thinking about what they could do differently in the classrooms.*

When Linde's gender non-binary child, June, began their social transition in fourth grade, their teacher embraced their decision and showed support with a physical representation of solidarity. Linde shared:

> *The teacher did go out and buy pins. A pin for my child that said, "they/them," and a pin for her which said, "she/her." When she presented my child with the pin, they said they weren't ready to wear the pin yet. The teacher did message me and said, "You know, I've done this, but your child isn't ready to wear it yet, but I've told them that when they're ready I'll wear mine with them in solidarity." Now [a few months later] my child is wearing the pin to school.*

When Maggie's child, Oliver, who identifies as a demi-boy and was in 4th grade at the time of the study, was ready to socially transition, Maggie emailed the teacher, who got back to her very quickly. A meeting with the school team was scheduled within a week, and the teacher facilitated a conversation with the class on the same afternoon as the meeting. Maggie recalled the following about the experience:

> *The class was coming in from recess, and he [the teacher] had changed my son's name on his cubby, and he put a Post-It note on everybody's desks. The kids were all abuzz, thinking they were getting a new student. Then he said, "Okay, we have something important to talk about." And I actually don't know exactly what he said because my kid didn't remember that part, but I imagine it was something like, "This classmate is transitioning to this and is going to be using 'he/him' pronouns, and if you have any questions, you can write them down on the Post-It and put them on my desk. My son told me it took about 3 days and then everyone was using the right name and pronouns, and, when people were using the wrong thing, everybody in the class would correct them and just say the right name. It was kind of magical, like after school specially."*

Friendships. Participants were also asked about their children's experiences with regards to friends. Some participants, whose children had positive experiences, remarked on their children's increased sense of belonging when they knew that there were other students "just like them." Emma shared, *"One day my son wore a rainbow sweatshirt to school and his homeroom teacher's kid came up to him and said, 'Are you a member of the LGBT community?' And my son said, "Yes,' and the teacher's kid said, 'Cool, me too."* And Linde commented:

> *They did share with me that there is one friend that is not in their class but goes to their school and my child had a discussion on kids messenger with this friend, telling them that their pronouns are they/them, and the friend said that their pronouns were they/them too. And so my child was really excited about that.*

Alternatively, many of the participants in the study reported the challenges and difficulties that their children experienced with regard to friends. Lane shared, "*It's been really hard for my child with regard to friends. My child also has ADHD and some anxiety and sensory issues, so they're already socially awkward to begin with. It's hard for them to fit in*." Andrea also shared that her son had some difficulties picking up on social cues, which, coupled with his trans gender identity, made it difficult for him to build relationships with the other boys in the class. She commented:

> *The friend thing has been hard. When he transitioned, he actively pursued the friendships of the boys in his class, and those boys are honestly not always that nice to him. It's kind of hard to watch, and because his social cues are not as great, he'll just keep trying. So we've really tried to encourage him to focus on finding friends who make him feel good about himself and who are nice to him.*

EB's child was required to hide their true identity from their best friend's father. EB shared the following:

> *The folks we are out with do not intentionally misgender our child, with the exception of the best friend's mother, who has to do it because the father is homophobic. So, the best friend's mom has to refer to our child with their birth certificate name and gender…It's to the point where our child actually changes shirts before going over to the best friend's. If they have a rainbow shirt, or something that's not ideal for the situation…it makes it less awkward. That's something we've talked about as a family…our kid would rather have their best friend than whatever immediate feelings of discomfort they may get when they're misgendered at the friend's house.*

These results suggest that friend support can increase connectedness and a sense of belonging in school, which can help counteract the other negative environmental influences that could otherwise decrease trans children's well being. Alternatively, when children's gender

identities are not affirmed and children are required to hide their true selves, feelings of inadequacy, exclusion, and even school avoidance can be the results.

Relationships with Other Caregivers. In the research, one area where caregivers reported having negative experiences was with regard to other caregivers, especially when it came to the disclosure of their children's trans identities. One study reported on the experiences of a parent who attempted to enroll her trans child in school, only to be met with resistance from other parents and a school administration that, instead of challenging the other parents' views, did not take action (Kuvalanka et al., 2014). Other parents reported being advised by school personnel to conceal their child's trans identity, which, they were told, might be met with discrimination (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017). Caregivers in this study were asked, *What has it been like with the caregivers of your child's friends?* Eka's fears echoed many of the themes present in the literature. Eka and Zoey arrived at their school district in the midst of a big fight about teaching about LGBTQIA+ topics in schools, and the district was considering adding topics to the formal curricula. Eka, who identifies as agender, shared that they had a difficult time connecting with other people in the school community, which they describe as being "a very liberal place." Eka recalled a specific situation:

> *During the whole fight over how things would be taught in schools I ended up in that circle of moms that happens at pickup, and I was elated, because I just needed to know about how the community worked, and the first conversation I heard was a parent saying, "I just don't understand why they need to talk about gay stuff at school, because then kids are going to get those ideas in their heads and then they might be gay."*

Eka was worried about their gender-expansive child being identified as a boy and questioned the school about how it would handle the situation of another parent complaining. The school assured them that their child would be supported. Eka shared the following:

> *We were very nervous about this gender non-conforming kid being identified as a boy.*

> *And I was like, "What if another parent is causing a problem…what if another parent figures out that there's a kid with a very girl name identifying as a boy, and they bring up an issue"… and they [the school] were just like, "Oh, they'll just have to deal with that. We're not going to back down from this because of another parent."*

In fact, Eka did encounter resistance to Zoey's gender identity from other caregivers in the school community. Eka commented, *"There's a family that used to pick up my kid after school in kindergarten…I think it was a lot of things, but once we were out they were like, 'Oh, we can't do that.' They didn't come to the birthday party either.*"

Another participant, Linde, provided another example of resistance from other adults in her school community. She recalled a school board meeting during which another parent shared her thoughts about trans children being permitted to use the bathroom that is aligned with the child's gender identity. She said the following:

> *There was a parent who stood up at the last meeting [board of education meeting] and talked about her concern about transgender children being allowed to use whatever bathroom they feel comfortable using. And how this would mean that grown men would be using little girls' bathrooms…just a lot of ignorance and fear. That worried m*e.

Alan shared the following about the other caregivers in his community:

> *Our inner circles are very supportive, and the parents try to reinforce it with their kids. Some of the older people, like the grandparent volunteers are so concerned on behalf of my child, like what's gonna happen when he has his period. They think I'm doing a terrible job as a parent, but in the nicest possible way. They love my kid. They just don't get it.*

And after Maggie's child, Oliver, came out at school, she received several supportive text messages from other caregivers. Maggie recalled, "*Within 24 hours of the conversation with the class, I had 3 text messages from parents saying, 'We're so happy for you. Let us know if you need anything.'"* These results indicate that the caregivers of trans children experience complex interactions and relationships with other caregivers as they attempt to support their children. Given the lack of general knowledge and understanding about trans identities, school leaders

should consider engaging the larger school community in dialogue by developing learning opportunities for families, so people have opportunities to learn about trangender identities.

Theme #5: Professional Development for Teachers

All of the participants identified teachers as needing opportunities to learn about diverse gender identities. Participants shared that being more knowledgeable about gender expansive and trans students could help teachers create more inclusive classrooms and facilitate students' sense of belonging.

Fear of Not Doing the Right Thing. Even participants who described their children's teachers as being "supportive" of their children's gender identities noted the uncertainty teachers expressed around not knowing what to do. For example, Andrea shared, "*I think she wanted to be in [child's] corner but not knowing what to do and also I think she hadn't had any training on this…she was a little uncomfortable with [child] using the boys' bathroom. She was willing to learn.*" Similarly, Fiona explained, "*I think it's new to them, so they don't have a lot of experience, and I don't know that there's much training. It seems like they're kind of on a similar journey as I am. They're figuring it out as they go.*" And Alan, who has a great deal of confidence in his child's school explained:

> *Some of the pre-K teachers are really having a hard time, because they've spent a whole year with him…some of the older teachers…when you explain to them you can just see them glazing over…but the bottom line is that they love my kid, so hopefully they'll come around.*

Participants acknowledged that, what can appear to be a lack of support, may stem from fear of reprisals or worries about "getting it right." When asked about their perceptions regarding teachers' comfort levels in working with gender diverse students, participants indicated that teachers needed more information about key concepts and misconceptions people have regarding gender being conflated with sex. Eka noted, "*I think that's the fear- that somehow we will be*

talking about sex with elementary school kids." Lane echoed that sentiment, "*I think people think gender diversity is directly related to sexuality, and at 9, most people are not sexual beings. We're talking about my child's gender identity, which is separate from whether they're gay or straight.*"

Addressing Bullying and Harassment. Participants also noted that teachers would benefit from concrete examples of how to respond to student's questions and how to intervene when they witness bullying and/or harassment. Emma commented:

> *Teachers are on the front lines with that kind of stuff [reading literature about different types of families] and they just want to say and do the right thing, and they don't always have the information they need, and, as a result, they say to kids, 'Oh, we're just not going to talk about that,' when kids ask questions.*

Christina offered the following: "*People sometimes need very concrete guidance. With teachers, talk about, 'Okay, instead of using boys and girls here's other alternatives.*'"

Correct Use of Names and Pronouns. Regarding teachers' use of the correct names/pronouns, Fiona shared, "*He [the teacher] doesn't really know how to use they/them pronouns. Everytime he refers to my child, he uses both 'they' and 'them'. He writes 'they/them' every time*." Eka, who identifies as "agender" describes their experiences with Zoey's teacher:

> *I've only had three meetings with the teacher…in those conversations, he can't gender my child. When he talks about her he stumbles through all the pronoun choices and just picks one. He's clearly deeply confused about my situation, so he just calls me 'Mama,' which I hate.*

Results indicate that teachers need more opportunities to learn about gender identities; however, waiting until a trans student enrolls or transitions to provide professional development to teachers can place trans students and their caregivers in a position where they end up bearing the burden of educating cisgender adults and leading the change effort in their children's schools.

Theme #6: A Position of Responsibility and Vulnerability

When schools do not support professional learning related to diverse gender identities, or when they wait until they have an openly identified trans student to do so, the child and/or the caregiver is situated as being responsible for others' learning. This turned out to be the case with many of the participants in the current study.

Administrators' Influence on Caregivers' Experiences. In many of the participants' cases, the children's social transitions began with a meeting with the school's administration, with counselors and teachers often being present as well. Two of the participants explicitly commented on the administrator's hesitancy/uncertainty about how to manage a social transition. Maggie shared the following:

> *There's not been a single person that's been negative at all…hesitant? I would say the principal. He's an older white man and during the first meeting he was like, "Thank you all for coming." And then he just starts talking and going on and on. I was like, "Dude, you're like the least part of this." He never said we should wait [to transition], he was just very much like, 'I'm not sure what to do. We've only ever done this over the summer. I would hope that, in 2022, an administrator would have a little more fluency with gender expansive kids.*

Andrea recalled the following about her child's school administrator:

> *It would have been nice if the principal could have had the person from the district, who has done this before, maybe across buildings, sit down with us in one of those meetings and be able to say, "This is how we support trans and gender expansive kids."*

Alan said the following regarding his child's experience:

> *I've appreciated the attitude and the effort. I never expected our school to get things right, certainly not from the start. But they're thinking about it, talking about it, and they're being proactive. In some ways our child is like a guinea pig. They're trying to adjust and figure out how they can do better in the future.*

And one participant, Eka, described the friction that accompanied Zoey's social transition. Eka explained:

> *They first asked me [at the meeting] to assign my kid's gender, and I was like, "I mean, do we have to assign something?" They were like, "It's boy, right? Put boy." That didn't feel good, but we did that. Then they were immediately concerned about the*

> *bathroom…We were the leaders. The school was never equipped to be a leader in this process. They would have led us on not the right path for our family. We had to be the leader.*

Teachers' Lack of Know-How. Participants also commented on teachers' lack of preparedness for encountering students with diverse gender identities. Andrea shared the following:

> *We were also in learning mode. This is not something we were prepared for in any way, so I spent a week reaching out to our resources and reading things on the internet. So we went back to her [the teacher] with a plan, which was: "Here's a book. Why don't you read it to the class and you can talk about pronouns?" Shortly after that we spoke with a gender consultant who was like, "Stop! Don't do this. This is a bad idea. Your teacher needs training and support. You can't just send her into this scenario.*"

Similarly, Maggie's child's teacher responded to her initial email by stating, " *I've never done this before. I don't know what's going on. You know, we support you, but I don't know what the protocol is."* EB, who is the caregiver of a gender non-binary child said the following about the PE teacher at his child's school:

> *We got a phone call from a PE teacher, because, at the time, they were doing things like boys versus girls, and for a soccer unit he was going to split the boys off with the boys and the girls off with the girls, and so he was sort of talking to us for guidance, not only in how to address our child but also for our suggestions about what he should do.*

When Andrea's trans first grade child started to tell other students in his class that he was a boy, the teacher contacted Andrea. Andrea explained, *"She was supportive but really had no idea what to do and was really coming to us and asking us, 'How do you want me to handle this situation?'"* Andrea went on to explain, *"It would be nice not to have the systems built around your child.*"

And Alan's child's teacher relied on him [the child] to take the lead. Alan explained:

> *I went along on a field trip, and I wasn't even thinking about the bathrooms, but they were lining up kids according to gender and the teacher picked it up immediately, pulled my child aside, and said, "What would you like to do?"*

These results illuminate how schools- even schools with personnel who wanted to create more gender-affirming spaces- struggled to provide adequate support for trans students. A more proactive approach can enable school districts to structure productive dialogue and avert problems before conflict arises. One proactive approach is for school districts to develop formal policies that support diverse gender identities.

Passing. Trans people who are perceived, or "read" by others as cisgender are commonly described as "passing" (Mangin, 2020). For young children, who have not yet developed secondary sex characteristics, passing is relatively easy. In the context of trans students and schools, it should be noted that when trans children socially transition in a way that preserves the boy-girl gender dichotomy, school personnel have an easier time understanding how to support them, since they simply integrate them into traditionally cisnormative spaces. Additionally, they are less worried about how others might react. Passing is a complex and controversial topic, since trans people who are able to benefit from passing in a cisnormative society do so at the same time that nonpassing trans people suffer from the same system. One participant, Eka, noted:

> *I know a lot of parents who can say, 'Okay, my child is a boy now. We're going to be all boy. We're going to meld into the fabric of society with a boy, and no one is going to know.' It actually did not occur to me, as a non-binary person, that doing that was a possibility, and my child wasn't conforming to any of the genders, so that wasn't really a possibility for us.*

Lane also commented on the unique challenges that AJ faces as a gender-fluid child,

> *You know, my kid is non-binary or gender fluid, so that doesn't mean that they're trans masculine, just because that's what's more known I think, and so I think there's been a little bit of confusion because there's a lack of knowledge or understanding.*

Theme #7: The Effects of Formal Policies

When asked about the policies and practices that are in place to support students with diverse gender identities and their perceptions regarding how successful the policies are in

facilitating meaningful changes to school practice, each of the participants reported that their child's school had a policy in place. Two of the schools had comprehensive antibullying/harassment policies that included protections for sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, while the other 8 had policies that were vague and nonspecific. Lane commented:

> *The school sent out a policy on hate speech and bullying, and it seems to kind of encompass all of the hate, whether it's racial or religious, or gender diversity. And they kind of reinforce it as like we don't tolerate hate speech and we don't tolerate bullying, and it needs to be reported when it happens.*

Similarly, Andrea shared the following about her child's school's policy:

> *There's a pretty progressive policy…people can use the bathroom and the pronouns, all of the documents need to be able to be changed…They have a really progressive dress code that doesn't discriminate based on gender.*

Unfortunately, official policies did not always result in meaningful changes to practices or beliefs. Andrea, commenting above about the progressive nature of her child's school policy also said, "*Yes [school has a policy]. It's progressive and supports kids. Kids can use the bathroom of the gender they identify with. Our principal didn't even know it existed.*" She went on to explain, "*What our school didn't have was the implementation…like what does it look like to implement these policies and what are the documents and processes that go along with that? And it would have been great if they could have come to us.*"

These results indicate that mandates alone are insufficient for changing school culture, and that policies need to be thoughtfully implemented, monitored, and enforced.

Theme #8: Resistance to Diverse Gender Identities

When asked about how they have encountered resistance to their children's gender identities from those in the school community, participants pointed to several discriminatory policies and practices (i.e., preventing a student from using chosen name and pronouns) and

described situations which had negative effects on their children's educational or psychological outcomes.

The Effects of Schools' Lack of Responsive Actions. One participant, Emma, whose trans child attends a private religious school described a particularly painful series of events that occurred at the start of his social transition in sixth grade. Emma explained:

> *The teacher was very supportive…and used his preferred name and pronouns. But later the principal found out about this and had a private meeting with me and the parish priest and the vice principal, and they told me that, due to Catholic social teaching, they could not use my child's preferred name or pronouns. One of the other things the principal told me when my child wanted to change his name was, "You know, other kids would want to change their names too, just for fun. This would be a logistical nightmare, so you can't let your child do this because then everyone else will want to do it," which didn't sound like a great argument for me.*

In this scenario Emma was requesting support and accommodation for her trans child, and, while the teacher was described as being supportive of the child's needs, the teacher was also required to navigate the discomfort of the administrator, due to his power in the institutional hierarchy. Additionally, the administrator failed to take the proactive steps to support and affirm Emma's son and was, in fact, intentionally unsupportive. Emma went on to explain:

> *I had also shared at the time that my child was in crisis and suicidal, and I wanted them to be aware that my child was at risk. They were compassionate in the words they used, and I think that's why they agreed to the compromise of letting him use initials [instead of a new name and preferred pronouns]. Then, the priest sent me an encyclical about how the binary is real and the cultural problems that are leading to a pervasive gender issue, and it's wrong. I got too upset to finish it.*

This clearly highlights the tension between comfort and discomfort that was present in Emma's conversations with her child's school about his inclusion. Even when the effects of the cis-normative school culture were life threatening for the trans student, which should have been the legitimate and urgent concern, the administrator continued to use the potential and perceived discomfort of the dominant majority as a rationale for only taking minimal steps- in this case

agreeing to allow the student to use initials instead of his name and pronouns- towards the student's inclusion. Finally, Emma said the following:

> *There was an email that was went a few weeks after my son had come out in which the vice principal said that my kid was talking a lot about not being able to use his preferred names or pronouns at school…the vice principal was starting to wonder if the school was still a good place for my kid.*

Emma did, in fact, switch her child to the local public school two months before the end of the 2021- 2022 school year, because things had gotten so bad. Emma shared:

> *Riley became increasingly withdrawn and depressed, began self harming through skin picking, and began to have suicidal thoughts. We had to call The Trevor Project hotline twice. He also had accidents at home because he would not use the girls' restroom at school. Holding it all day really messed up his bladder function.*

Emma reported that her child is much happier in his new school, where he is permitted to use his new name, pronouns, and any restroom he prefers, but she also shared that he still has flashbacks, panic attacks, and trouble sleeping and is undergoing trauma therapy due to the lack of acceptance at his former Catholic school.

A second participant, Andrea, also discussed the effects of her child's school delaying the meeting to discuss her child's social transition. She shared:

> *For that time [2-3 months waiting for a meeting] the teacher continued to use she/her pronouns. At home, it was he/him. He got a haircut. He was socially transitioned at home. We had a very awkward several months where we would go to playdates where the kids would know him as she/her.*

Lane, who identifies as gender-fluid commented:

> *There's a resistance in not wanting to interact with me. I assume they're the same way with my child. I want to give people the benefit of the doubt and say that it's not intentional resistance, but there's only so many times I can politely correct you or inquire about things before I feel like you're not even trying and that means it's intentional in my opinion.*

And Eka, who identifies as agender, and kept their gender identity hidden from the school because they thought doing so would be easier for their child, said:

> *We felt like it was better to lie to our school community about who we were, because we were worried about how they would treat our kid when we weren't there. We were worried that our kid wasn't going to have any friends. Then, when those things happened, we decided to just be honest about who we were.*

These results describe how fear and anxiety can create resistance and dismissal towards practices that would accommodate trans students' needs and disrupt the binary gender expectations and cisnormativity that exist in elementary schools. Intentional actions are needed to challenge the binary gender norms that priviledge cisgender identities at the expense of trans students' sense of belonging.

Theme #9: The Political Landscape and Its Effects on Trans Students' Rights

Contributing to people's resistance to diverse gender identities is the fact that the issue of trans students' rights has become deeply political, and school district leadership may be reluctant to initiate discussions about topics that are perceived as controversial or political. During the 2022 legislative session, 12 states will consider anti-LGBTQIA+ bills aimed at discriminating against LGBTQIA+ youth in schools. These bills target trans people for discrimination by barring or criminalizing healthcare for trans youth, barring access to the use of appropriate facilities like restrooms, restricting trans students' ability to fully participate in school and sports, prohibiting classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels, and prohibiting teachers and others from discussing their gender identities (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022). Perhaps the most talked about measures came out of Texas and Florida. In March of 2022, Governor Greg Abbott of Texas issued a letter to Texas state health agencies announcing that delivering gender-affirming medical treatments to transgender youths "constitutes child abuse" under state law. The letter stipulated that doctors, nurses and teachers are legally now required to report parents who aid their child in receiving such care to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) (Sharrow, E. & Sederbaum, I., 2022).

Measures like this have caused fear and anxiety among the participants in this study, with some considering moving out of state so that they can continue to support and affirm their children without being afraid. EB commented, "*We're fortunate enough to be in an area where I don't have to fear for my child's physical safety because of their identity. I don't have to worry about being charged with child endangerment or child abuse for taking care of my child*." And Maggie shared her feelings on the topic:

> *I think the cultural backlash against the progress we've made…I think the backlash is going to be really bad for trans kids in elementary schools. My husband and I have talked about it. We might have to move. We're not going to send our kid back into the closet. We still didn't have our gender appointment yet, but we're hoping to get the stuff in motion to put him on puberty blockers so we have some more time to figure out what's going on, and, if we could be prosecuted for doing that stuff, then that's not tenable for us. Our kid's mental health comes first.*

And then in April of 2022, Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis signed into law a bill that bans instruction and classroom discussions about LGBTQIA+ issues in kindergarten through third grade (Phillips, A., 2022). When asked about the effects that laws like Florida's "Don't Say Gay" Bill will have on young trans children, particularly those in elementary schools, participants remarked that they are likely to exacerbate the negative educational and psychological outcomes for trans students. Lane commented:

> *I feel like that's the opposite direction we need to be going in, because that's creating more hate and oppression to already marginalized groups of people and so not feeling safe to talk to doctors or to talk to school administrators or have the conversations that they're questioning things is gonna be really detrimental to mental health.*

Christina likened the topic to what happened with sex education in schools across the United States. She said, "*I can imagine that there will be this inequitable impact on kids in similar ways [to sex education] based on where they live*." Eka, who identifies as agender explained, "*We arrived in the midst of a big fight about teaching about queer people in*

school…about whether or not that would formally be part of the curricula." They went on to explain,

> *During the whole fight over how things would be taught in schools I ended up in that circle of moms that happens at pickup, and I was elated, because I just needed to know about how the community worked, and the first conversation I heard was a parent saying, "I just don't understand why they need to talk about gay stuff at school, because then kids are going to get those ideas in their heads and then they might be gay…So, It has been a struggle for us to connect with people in a place that prides itself on being a very liberal place. Because still, even in this very liberal place, it's the very heteronormative world of parenting. A school community feels like an impenetrably heteronormative place that is, to some extent, about conformity.*

These results indicate that schools may become even more hesitant to discuss gender identity with students, even if the conversations are developmentally appropriate. Additionally, school administrators might feel trapped in the cross-hairs of competing political narratives and be reluctant to appear political or side with one faction over another.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results gathered from this study provide informative knowledge regarding caregivers' perceptions of their trans children's elementary school experiences. The caregivers' examples demonstrate both the successes and challenges of creating affirming school environments for students with diverse gender identities. Readers of this study can deepen their understanding about why we need to make schools gender inclusive and how we might go about doing so. The previous chapters presented background and context for the study, supporting literature, and the perceptions of caregivers regarding their trans children's elementary school experiences were presented. In the final chapter, a discussion of the results and implications for theory and practice are explored.

CHAPTER FIVE

Summary & Discussion

Through this qualitative, phenomenological study, I examined caregivers' perceptions of their trans children's experiences in elementary schools in the United States. The study began with an introduction to trans identities and an overview of school climate research that reviewed several aspects of school climates from the perspective of trans students. Based on the overview, I found that limited research currently exists about the experiences and perspectives of trans children, in a sense that the research did not provide a comprehensive overview of the unique needs of trans children in elementary schools. Despite the scarcity of literature on the trans population in elementary schools, foundational literature does exist. Baldwin (2015) and then Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2017) both categorized caregivers' patterns of experiences with school systems into one of three groups: (1) schools that were inclusive, (2) schools that tried to be inclusive, and (3) schools that were resistant with regard to supporting trans children and their caregivers. Then, Mangin, in her studies (2019, 2020) identified three key characteristics of principals that, when combined, increased principals' capacities to meet trans students' needs. Additionally, she found that teachers were able to create classrooms where trans students experienced affirmation and belonging, which are necessary for engagement and learning. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by bringing back the voices of caregivers of trans children and situating trans students' experiences in elementary schools in the United States within the existing bodies of research to highlight this field as an important emerging area of scholarship for education researchers. The following chapter provides an overview of the methods, a summary of the results, an examination of the results as they relate to the literature

and current research on the topic, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Overview of Methods

Qualitative research methods were utilized to generate data to answer two research questions. The questions guiding this research were:

1. What are caregiver's perceptions of their trans children's elementary school experiences?
2. What do caregivers describe as the supportive and unsupportive characteristics of their children's elementary schools?

Participants. Participants were recruited through Facebook (Meta), the online social networking site (SNS). To be included in the study, participants had to meet the following inclusion criteria:

Criterion #1: Participants must be caregivers, 18 years and older, who have parented a trans—having a gender identity that is gender non-binary or transgender—child of 11 years of age or younger within the past five years.

Criterion #2: Their trans child must attend or have previously attended an elementary school in the United States within the past five years.

Criterion #3: Caregivers must indicate a gender-affirmative parenting stance with respect to their trans child (i.e., a nonjudgmental approach that respects and supports the child's gender identity).

To begin the study, participants completed a Qualtrics Demographic Information Survey (See Appendix A), which asked a series of standard demographic questions, including caregivers' gender identity and preferred pronouns, child's gender identity and preferred

pronouns, school type (i.e., public, public-charter, private-independent, private-religious), and geographic region in which the school is located.

Semi-structured Interviews. In order to learn about participants' lived experiences, I employed the use of semi-structured interviews to learn more about caregivers' attitudes, opinions, beliefs, and perceptions. For the semi-structured interviews, specific questions were developed drawing on the literature and Mangin's (2020) case studies of five elementary schools, which demonstrated the successes and challenges of creating affirming school climates for trans students. The interview protocol consisted of open-ended questions that explored caregivers' personal experiences interacting with their children's elementary schools and included initial questions paired with probative follow-up questions designed to invite clarification or further details from the participants.

Discussion of the Results

The findings of this study were discussed in detail in the previous chapter. I used procedures for data analysis that came from phenomenological research, and various strategies and methods were used to uncover themes that informed the findings of the research study. The goal of the interviews was to understand the perceptions of caregivers about their trans children's elementary school experiences. I sought to provide a nuanced characterization of trans students' elementary school experiences by eliciting descriptions of positive and negative school factors from their caregivers. A better understanding of these factors may help to identify relevant components of effective school practices for this population. This includes identifying positive factors that should be enhanced and negative factors whose effects might be ameliorated in service of reducing the challenges faced by trans youth. Based on existing literature, I developed a prefigured coding scheme to use during data analysis, which included the following themes: (a)

inclusive and supportive policies, (b) student safety, (c) relationships, (d) classroom practices, and (e) institutional environment. However, as suggested by Creswell (2013), I remained open to adding additional codes, should they emerge during the analysis. Next, I employed Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method in analyzing participants' transcripts. From the 10 verbatim transcripts, I extracted 195 significant statements. Then, I arranged the formulated meanings into clusters, which resulted in 9 themes. The development of themes reflects my efforts to bring interpretive insight, analytic scrutiny, and order to the data. The data showed that, in order for trans students to experience a sense of belonging, schools must offer immediate support to them that considers the following:

I. The Institutional Environment

II. Classroom Practices

III. Gender Policing

IV. The Role of Supportive People in the School Community

V. The Effects of Formal Policies

VI. Professional Development for Teachers

VII. A Position of Responsibility and Vulnerability

VIII. Resistance to Diverse Gender Identities

IX. The Effects of the Political Landscape on Trans Students' Rights

Themes I through VIII affirm the previous research on the topic. The last theme, "The Effects of the Political Landscape on Trans Students' Rights" emerged as a new contribution to the literature. The following sections discuss each of the themes in turn.

Institutional Environment. Studies have demonstrated that schools are inherently gendered spaces that reflect and perpetuate our societal norms, including norms related to gender

(Mangin, 2020; Meyer, 2022; Nicolazzo (2017a). Chapter 2 discussed how pre-K-12 schools explicitly and implicitly reinforce cis-heteronormative ideals and interpretations of gender and sexuality, which are particularly harmful to trans youth, who begin to discover at an early age that something fundamental about their identities is unacceptable (Bryan, 2012). We also know from the existing research that attempts to support trans youth have tended to focus on a more individualized approach that relies on trans students being visible and declaring themselves as a catalyst for intervention and accommodation (Luecke, 2018; Mangin, 2020; Martino et. al, 2022; Meyer et al., 2016). This overarching theme recurred throughout the interviews, as caregivers described the ways in which gender plays a large role in their children's elementary school experiences, physically and conceptually. Caregivers agreed that the limits imposed by traditional notions of gender inhibited their trans children's development and reinforced inequity. Through the institutional reinforcement of cisnormativity, teachers and staff organizing students by binary genders, the presence of gender markers in written policy, documents, and communication, and the physical, gendered school spaces, the schools failed to facilitate a true sense of belonging for their children. Two participants brought up the fact that gender markers appear on school forms, students' email and technology accounts, and on standardized tests. In both cases the schools affirmed the children's gender identities by using the children's chosen names and pronouns without requiring "proof" or legal documentation. Regarding school-sponsored programs, events, and activities, caregivers reported that their children's schools reinforced and reproduced cisnormative views of gender by formally sanctioning gendered attire in the form of school uniforms, or clothing required for school performances and events.

Perhaps the most visible cisnormative school space is the bathroom, which is also the area that often receives the most attention, likely due to the health and safety concerns- whether

real or perceived- in this unmonitored space. Anti-trans rhetoric falsely posits trans people as predatory (causing fear among cis people), even though research shows that trans people are the ones at risk of discrimination, harassment, and assault (Mangin, 2020). Mangin (2020) concluded that schools generally attend to gendered spaces by utilizing one of three broad approaches: (1) accommodate students, (2) assimilate students, and (3) modify spaces for universal accessibility. Among the schools in this study, the first two approaches dominated. In other words, most of the schools in the study were, or at least tried to be, inclusive of the caregivers' trans children (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017). In contrast, efforts to modify spaces to create universal access were limited or nonexistent.

With regard to bathrooms, when schools *accommodate* trans students, they identify an alternate bathroom for the student to use, perhaps one in the nurse's office, or a teacher's bathroom (Mangin, 2020). In this study, some of the faculty at the children's schools- administration, teachers, and counselors- worked with the caregivers to informally determine what types of accommodations might be needed. Emma's child's school attempted to identify an alternate bathroom for Riley to use, in this case a teacher's bathroom, which Emma said that Riley did not want to use, because he was comfortable using the boys bathroom and said that the suggested teacher's bathroom was "awkward" and farther away. Zoey's, Eka's child, school attempted to do the same thing, and even cited "safety" as the reason. In this case, the school was worried that Zoey might encounter physical threats and/or animosity in the boy's bathroom; however, neither Zoey nor Eka had concerns about how Zoey would navigate the space. So, while accommodations may reduce the stress associated with single-sex bathrooms for some trans students, they often come with other challenges. When trans students are encouraged to use bathroom facilities that are different from their peers they might worry how to explain to their

peers why they are using a different bathroom. So, accommodations may actually just shift rather than alleviate children's distress (Mangin, 2020).

Other participants shared their children's distress regarding the use of the bathrooms that were designated for either boys or girls. For example, Lane's child AJ was intentionally avoiding the bathroom all day. As Mangin (2020) points out, "Tasks that cisgender people take for granted can present daunting obstacles for people whose gender identity or expression differs from their sex assigned at birth. Constantly having to navigate binary, cisnormative school spaces can exacerbate dysphoria, increase the risk of harassment and bullying, and may result in school avoidance" (p. 125).

The second approach, assimilation, refers to integrating trans children who "pass" into cisnormative spaces. Rather than diverting students to alternate spaces, schools that use an assimilation approach provide the trans student with access to cisnormative spaces and affirm their right to occupy such spaces based on their gender identity (Mangin, 2020). The assimilation approach is used most often when a known trans child conforms to binary, cisgender norms (i.e., they look and behave like their affirmed gender, which is either "boy" or "girl"). In this study, two of the participant's children's schools employed an assimilation approach.

The final approach- to modify spaces for universal access- was described by just one of the caregivers. This child's school was proactive in modifying the traditionally gendered bathrooms so that the trans child was not required to adapt to a binary, cisnormative space.

Classroom Practices. There is a large body of research whose researchers have explored what kinds of teacher behaviors yield the best student outcomes. Much of the research has focused on the importance of teacher's pedagogical knowledge for students' academic achievement (Berliner, 2004; Ozdas, 2022). However, school climate data reveals that when

students have a strong sense of belonging and positive interpersonal relationships, they also have greater academic success (Cohen, 2009). A sense of belonging, also referred to as "school connectedness" in some of the literature (Prevention, 2009), has been associated with higher academic achievement and better mental health outcomes, such as less frequent suicidal ideation among trans youth (Whitaker et al., 2016). These research findings suggest that trans children are not inherently at risk, but rather unsupportive school environments can create the conditions that put them at risk. Knowing that students' sense of belonging is vital for their academic success, teachers must create classroom environments where trans students know that their teachers care about their individuality as much as they do about their learning outcomes (Prevention, 2009).

Mangin, in her 2020 study, identified three main principles for gender-inclusive classroom instruction: (a) decrease gendered practices, (b) increase discussions about gender, and (c) affirm children's gender identity and expression. Collectively, these classroom practices not only contribute to trans students' sense of belonging, but these practices also help cisgender students learn about and accept experiences that differ from their own (Mangin, 2020). This theme resonated with caregivers during the study, who reported how teachers directly influenced their children's school experiences through their classroom practices and interactions, specifically through their use of pronouns, by organizing students by binary genders, and through the formal and informal curriculum.

Decrease Gendered Practices. Existing research suggests that using a student's chosen name in school is associated with better mental health outcomes, especially when a student's disclosure to the teacher resulted in the teacher using the student's chosen name without requiring "proof" of legal documentation (Feijo et al., 2022; Mangin, 2020). Additionally, teachers support of students' chosen names has been associated with less school victimization

and absenteeism, as well as with school connectedness, among transgender youth (Pollitt et al., 2021). In this study, all but one of the caregivers reported that their children's schools used the children's chosen name and pronouns, though they reported that the teachers needed more information about the use of different types of pronouns.

Increase Discussions About Gender. Research conducted in the United States by GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) reports high levels of transphobia in schools, with 87.4% of LGBTQIA+ students indicating that they heard negative remarks specifically about trans people, while 43.7% heard them often or frequently (see Kosciw et al., 2020). However, Kosciw et al. (2020) found that in schools where there was evidence of a curriculum that was LGBTQIA+ inclusive, students were less likely to hear such negative remarks. Kosciw et al. (2020) found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) topics were more commonly included in classroom curricula and/or discussions than trans topics. Additional research presented in Chapter 2 suggests that trans students' experiences may be shaped by the inclusion of trans-related information in the curriculum. Learning about LGBTQIA+ historical events and positive role models may enhance LGBTQIA+ students' engagement in their schools and provide valuable information about the LGBTQIA+ community (GLSEN, 2020). Additionally, Mangin (2020) cites the multiple benefits of discussing gender with children. She notes that learning gender-related terms provides children with language to better express themselves, and talking about gender can build awareness of diverse gender identities and help refute negative gender stereotypes (Mangin, 2020).

Participants in this study were asked whether their children had been exposed to representations of LGBTQIA+ people, history, or events in lessons at school, and all of the participants reported that their children's schools did not, to their knowledge, include these topics

in the formal curriculum. Participants were also asked about their children's opportunities to discuss gender and/or gender norms at school, since research suggests that having conversations specifically about gender can build awareness and refute negative gender stereotypes. One participant mentioned that her child's teacher was facilitating conversations about gender identity and expression, especially after her child came out. However, the majority of the participants said that conversations, if they were had at all, were more vague and nonspecific, with the teacher focusing on kindness and respect rather than specifically addressing diverse gender identities.

Affirm Children's Gender Identity and Expression. According to the literature presented in Chapter 2, one feature of inclusive schools is that they are depicted in research as "accepting" children as they are (Riggs and Bartholomaues, 2017). Given that social transition is considered best practice for promoting trans children's well being, supportive schools must demonstrate an affirmative approach to trans children. Mangin (2020) defines gender affirmation as "the process of recognizing, validating, and supporting another person's gender identity regardless of whether that identity conforms to social norms" (p. 113). In the current study, the presence of caring adults and the positive impacts those adults had on participants' trans children became an emerging theme as participants described the supportive characteristics of their children's elementary schools. Teachers, counselors, and school psychologists were identified by caregivers as being the most supportive personnel in their children's schools. Participants reported that the counselors facilitated many of the gender support plan meetings, developed safety plans, and provided specific strategies to the classroom teachers. Teachers also played a critical role in affirming caregivers' children's gender identities. When one participant's gender non-binary child began their social transition in fourth grade, their teacher embraced their decision and

showed support with a physical representation of solidarity. The teacher bought pronoun pins for her and her student- one that said “they/them” for the child and one that said “she/her” for her. Another participant’s child was ready to socially transition in 4th grade, so the participant emailed the teacher, who got back to her very quickly. A meeting with the school team was scheduled within a week, and the teacher facilitated a conversation with the class on the same afternoon as the meeting.

Gender Policing. Chapter 2 presented gender policing as a concept that expands the bullying narrative by considering the complex system of social interactions through which young people negotiate their positions within social hierarchies (Payne & Smith, 2016). Researchers, through their observations and interviews with youth, have generated evidence that illustrates how cis-heteronormativity, which inscribes a linear relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality, dominates school settings and how individuals, whose masculinity or femininity are perceived to violate this cultural standard, experience various levels of aggression from microaggressions (Sue, 2010) to overt verbal and physical violence (Payne & Smith, 2016). As students go about their days, all of their actions and interactions are measured against heteronormative standards, which serve as tools for acquiring social power (Payne & Smith, 2016). All types of gender policing are damaging, and all youth are vulnerable to targeting, but trans youth are particularly vulnerable to escalating violence that creates hostile learning environments (Payne & Smith, 2016).

In this study, participants described situations in which their trans children were met with high levels of intolerance and, in some cases, became the targets of discrimination, harassment, and bullying. Additionally, participants reported challenges related to friendships due to their children’s diverse gender identities. The results help to illuminate that, while adults often

question whether gender is an appropriate topic in elementary schools, gender is already a pervasive component of schooling. Participants agreed that providing students with opportunities to discuss gender could build awareness and refute negative gender stereotypes.

The Role of Supportive Adults in the School Community. According to existing research, supportive teachers, principals, and other school staff serve as an important resource for trans students. Being able to speak with a caring adult in school may have a significant positive impact on school experiences for students, particularly those who feel marginalized or experience harassment (Kosciw et. al., 2020). Additionally, the benefits of open communication and advocacy by parents, educators, and principals helped to create a safer environment for trans students (Goldstein et al., 2018; Mangin, 2020). By hearing trans students' experiences through their families, teachers can better understand their needs (Goldstein et al., 2018). Supportive principals seem to (a) employ a child-centered approach to decision making, (b) leverage learning and knowledge to create a positive elementary school experience for transgender children, and (c) characterize their experience as professionally and personally beneficial (Mangin, 2020).

The presence of caring adults and the positive impacts those adults had on participants' trans children became an emerging theme as participants described the supportive characteristics of their children's elementary schools. Teachers, counselors, and school psychologists were identified by caregivers as being the most supportive personnel in their children's schools.

Peers and Friendships. Participants were also asked about their children's experiences with regards to friends. Some participants, whose children had positive experiences, remarked on their children's increased sense of belonging when they knew that there were other students "just like them." Alternatively, many of the participants in the study reported the challenges and

difficulties that their children experienced with regard to friends. These results suggest that friend support can increase connectedness and a sense of belonging in school, which can help counteract the other negative environmental influences that could otherwise decrease trans children's well-being. Alternatively, when children's gender identities are not affirmed and children are required to hide their true selves, feelings of inadequacy, exclusion, and even school avoidance can be the results.

The Effects of Formal Policies. According to the research presented in Chapter 2, a key feature of inclusive schools is that they were proactive in developing and implementing inclusive policies and procedures, such as strong anti-bullying policies, that were inclusive of trans students (Baldwin, 2015) and that directly addressed the reasons for bullying, rather than viewing bullying as isolated incidents (Payne & Smith, 2012). Additionally, students in districts with policies that specifically addressed sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE) reported significantly greater school safety, less victimization, and less social aggression compared with peers in districts with generic and/or no identified policies. In fact, schools with generic policies, meaning policies that did not address specifically SOGIE, did not exhibit different outcomes from schools without identified policies (Kull et al., 2016). Higher teacher support was also reported in schools with SOGIE-focused policies (Day et al., 2020).

Participants in the current study were asked about the policies and practices that are in place to support students with diverse gender identities and their perceptions regarding how successful the policies are in facilitating meaningful changes to school practice. Each of the participants reported that their child's school had a policy in place. Two of the schools had comprehensive antibullying/harassment policies that included protections for sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, while the other 8 had policies that were vague and unspecific.

Professional Development For Adults in the School. Schools that are inclusive are depicted in research as "taking the lead" in ensuring the inclusion of trans children through providing information to staff (Riggs and Bartholomaeus, 2017). However, we know from the research that teachers do not always feel that they have the requisite knowledge to be able to support trans students or to educate about gender expansiveness and what this entails (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2018; Leonardi & Staley, 2018; Payne & Smith, 2014; Smith & Payne, 2016) In the current study, all of the participants identified teachers as needing opportunities to learn about diverse gender identities. Participants shared that being more knowledgeable about gender expansive and trans students could help teachers create more inclusive classrooms and facilitate students' sense of belonging. Even participants who described their children's teachers as being "supportive" of their children's gender identities noted the uncertainty teachers expressed around not knowing what to do. Results indicate that teachers need more opportunities to learn about gender identities; however, waiting until a trans student enrolls or transitions to provide professional development to teachers can place trans students and their caregivers in a position where they end up bearing the burden of educating cisgender adults and leading the change effort in their children's schools.

It is also worth mentioning that, beyond teachers, schools employ a wide range of support staff. In her study, Mangin (2020) found that non-certified staff (i.e., lunch aides, hall monitors, food service employees, and bus drivers) seldom had opportunities to learn about gender or trans students. This is problematic, since non-certified staff are often supervising spaces where trans children are most at risk. Primary and secondary students report that some of the most dangerous school space — places where they are most likely to be bullied, harassed, and/or assaulted — include the bathroom, locker room, playground, hallways, and cafeteria (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Thus, school spaces that are under the supervision of non-certified staff, who are unlikely to receive professional learning, could present risks to trans students. An uninformed adult in a position of authority could exacerbate a bullying situation or inadvertently disclose a trans student's identity, violating the Family Educational Right and Privacy Act (FERPA) and placing the student at risk (Mangin, 2020). A more proactive approach to professional learning — one that includes non-certified staff and school visitors — could contribute to a more knowledgeable school community and decrease the risks that trans students experience in schools (Mangin, 2020).

Responsibility and Vulnerability. While the "student-in-charge" narrative—where the trans student is put at the center of decision making—is usually celebrated (Luecke, 2018; Meyer, 2022), concerns were also raised in the literature (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018; Mangin, 2020). Since educators and students are embedded in a cisnormative context (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018), trans students and their families may be seen as "sacrificial lambs," losing their right to privacy by being a catalyst for learning (Meyer, 2022). This notion can situate the trans child as representative of an entire complex community (Mangin, 2020). When schools do not support professional learning related to diverse gender identities, or when they wait until they have an openly identified trans student to do so, the child and/or the caregiver is situated as being responsible for others' learning. This turned out to be the case with many of the participants in the current study. In many of the participants' cases, the children's social transitions began with a meeting with the school's administration, with counselors and teachers often being present as well. Two of the participants explicitly commented on the administrator's hesitancy/uncertainty about how to manage a social transition. The data illuminates how schools- even schools with personnel who wanted to create more gender-affirming spaces- struggled to provide adequate

support for trans students. Additionally, the data suggests that relying on individual caregivers to advocate for their children and educate the school is a serious limitation, since caregivers could be out of step with state policies and legislation and/or with current research regarding best practice recommendations (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017).

Resistance to Diverse Gender Identities. In terms of the negative experiences reported by caregivers, certain key areas predominated the literature. The first area pertains to how schools viewed trans students. For example, caregivers found schools to be restrictive when the school considered their child to be "outside the norm," which occurred in schools where gender and sexuality were conflated and where discrimination and marginalization arose from cisgenderism (Pullen, Robichaud, & dumais-Michaud, 2015). In these schools, caregivers reported needing to be constantly vigilant in order to protect and support their children, because the lack of a clear and accurate understanding of trans identities often led schools to adopt restrictive and regressive approaches to engaging with trans students and their families (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2017).

When asked about how they have encountered resistance to their children's gender identities from those in the school community, participants reported several situations which had negative effects on their children's educational or psychological outcomes. The results indicate that intentional actions are needed to challenge the binary gender norms that privilege cisgender identities at the expense of trans students' sense of belonging. One participant, Emma, whose trans child attended a private religious school described a particularly painful series of events that occurred at the start of his social transition in sixth grade. At the time, Emma was requesting support and accommodation for her trans child, and, while the teacher was described as being supportive of the child's needs, the teacher was also required to navigate the discomfort of the

administrator, due to his power in the institutional hierarchy. Additionally, the administrator failed to take the proactive steps to support and affirm Emma's son and was, in fact, intentionally unsupportive. This example highlights the tension between comfort and discomfort that was present in Emma's conversations with her child's school about his inclusion. Even when the effects of the cis-normative school culture were life threatening for the trans student, which should have been the legitimate and urgent concern, the administrator continued to use the potential and perceived discomfort of the dominant majority as a rationale for only taking minimal steps- in this case agreeing to allow the student to use initials instead of his name and pronouns- towards the student's inclusion. These results indicate that intentional actions are needed to challenge the binary gender norms that privilege cisgender identities at the expense of trans students' sense of belonging.

The Political Landscape and Its Effects on Trans Students' Rights. This final theme, which emerged during analysis as a new contribution to the literature, provides and extends theoretical and empirical insights into the systemic barriers that continue to impact school personnel in their capacity to support trans students. Across the United States, there has been a wave of anti-trans legislation that will have significant repercussions for trans students. As Affonesca (2021) noted, the "effects of anti-trans legislation——and the rhetoric that accompanies it—[are] often seen in classrooms and schools across the country where students… combat discrimination, fear and harassment" (para. 7). Trans students' rights should not be subject to politics, and yet resistance to addressing gender and sexual diversity is no more pronounced than within the context of schools (Martino, 2022).

During the 2022 legislative session, 12 states will consider anti-LGBTQIA+ bills aimed at discriminating against LGBTQIA+ youth in schools. These bills target trans people for

discrimination by barring or criminalizing healthcare for trans youth, barring access to the use of appropriate facilities like restrooms, restricting trans students' ability to fully participate in school and sports, prohibiting classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in certain grade levels, and prohibiting teachers and others from discussing their gender identities (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022). Perhaps the most talked about measures came out of Texas and Florida. In March of 2022, Governor Greg Abbott of Texas issued a letter to Texas state health agencies announcing that delivering gender-affirming medical treatments to transgender youths "constitutes child abuse" under state law. The letter stipulated that doctors, nurses and teachers are legally now required to report parents who aid their child in receiving such care to the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) (Sharrow, E. & Sederbaum, I., 2022). Measures like this have caused fear and anxiety among the participants in this study, with some considering moving out of state so that they can continue to support and affirm their children without being afraid.

Data from this study suggests that contributing to people's resistance to diverse gender identities is the fact that, because the issue of trans students' rights has become deeply political, school district leadership may be reluctant to initiate discussions about topics that are perceived as controversial or political. These results indicate that schools may become even more hesitant to discuss gender identity with students, even if the conversations are developmentally appropriate. Additionally, school administrators might feel trapped in the crosshairs of competing political narratives and be reluctant to appear political or side with one faction over another. One thing is clear, and that is when culture wars descend upon schools, vulnerable children are often caught in the crossfire. The time to act is now, since transgender individuals

experience disparate rates of serious mental health concerns including depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Theoretical Implications

Connections to the Theoretical Framework

Queer pedagogy, which explores the intersection between queer theory and critical pedagogy, served as the primary focus guiding this inquiry (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Critical theory challenges current notions of educational reality, encourages change, identifies those who can implement change, and serves as a catalyst for social transformation (Kinchelog & McClaren, 2000; Wing, 2004), while queer theory links gender stereotypes to the norms of heterosexuality and questions the assumption that there is any "normal" expression of gender (Blaise & Taylor, 2012). Using the theoretical lens of queer theory directs one's attention to the cis-heterosexual discourses that are present in early childhood contexts and produce power relations and dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, which may impede the academic, social, safety, and educational needs of trans students (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Bryan, 2012).

Results from this study illuminate the ways in which cis-hetero-normativity continues to be reinforced in elementary school environments. In this study, participants reported that binary norms were reinforced through the following: (a) school functions, like "daddy/daughter" dances and youth sports; (b) in the sorting and organization of students by binary genders; (c) gender markers in written policy, formal documents, and communication; (d) gendered school spaces, like bathrooms and locker rooms; (e) teachers' use of language; and (f) formal and informal curriculum. Each of these practices rely on binary gender norms to maintain power imbalances and perpetuate inequality. Additionally, when caregivers approached their children's schools' leaders to request support and accommodations for their trans children, they were, in many cases,

met with discomfort from school personnel, which resulted in both delayed or inaction and/or inclusion strategies that were individualized or temporary. This echoes the current research on the topic, which suggests that school leaders have the tendency to think of gender diversity work in terms of visible differences or individualized cases of abnormal identities or needs, rather than in terms of systemic marginalization and inequitable distribution of power (Payne & Smith, 2018). Supporting individual trans students only when they present themselves will continue to result in insufficient practices that will not disrupt the gender binary or sustain meaningful change. The larger problem of gender inequity will remain until cisgender individuals use their privileged positions of power to challenge gender bias in schools and shift the status quo. Recommendations provided later in this chapter include proactive strategies for doing just that.

Limitations

Despite a robust study design, perhaps the greatest limitation of the present study is the applicability, or generalizability, of the findings to other settings with other participants. Although I attempted to sample for variation, selecting participants who represented the variety of legal, political, and educational contexts of trans students attending elementary schools in the U.S., I must also acknowledge that recruiting through online advocacy organizations most likely resulted in selection bias. The demographic profile of participants was representative of caregivers that would be best equipped and have ample resources to support their trans child. Additionally, as part of the sampling criteria, the caregivers must have characterized themselves as being supportive of their children's gender identities. As a result, findings may not generalize to other populations where caregivers do not support their trans children, or who do not have the knowledge, education, or support to advocate for their trans children. This limitation might illuminate wider cultural trends in child rearing that are inflected by cultural, political, or even

religious viewpoints. Despite the potential limited demographic profile of participants, I firmly believe that the information gleaned from even one person can inform others about the experiences of trans students in elementary schools. Additionally, the in-depth interviews were performed on a relatively new and understudied population, and their stories have the potential to inform and empower others to action.

A second limitation that merits mention is that the results will be drawn from participants' self-reports, which may be partial representations or not reflect the experiences of other caregivers and their children.

Equity Considerations

LGBTQIA+ Identities are *Educational* Issues, Not Political Ones. Binary gender norms will not change unless school leaders engage in difficult conversations about gender; however, many school leaders offer multiple reasons why the political climate of their school districts or communities made it difficult or impossible for LGBTQIA+ topics to be included in professional development. The results from this study are helpful to understand the current political context that situates this topic as one that is deeply partisan. Legally, under Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (20 U.S.C. § 1681) schools cannot discriminate against trans students; However, in several states across the country, politicians have pushed for restrictions and enacted laws on classroom instruction, youth sports, and health care (Glueck & Mazzei, 2022). School districts will need to be ready to clarify their position on the rights of trans students. Schools should start by countering the assumption that LGBTQIA+ topics are controversial and possibly inappropriate, and such that leaders must seek permission or community consensus before action can be taken (Payne & Smith, 2018). Research documents,

and the participants in this study elaborated on, how expectations for gender conformity are an integral part of K-12 school life, constantly taught and reinforced through institutional structure, formal and informal curriculum, school sponsored events, and interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, research about trans students' safety at school and academic outcomes- including trans students' disproportionate risk for violence, harassment, low academic achievement, and school dropout- should be enough evidence to make the argument that school leaders have a professional responsibility to disrupt the stigma surrounding diverse gender identities and improve educational outcomes for trans students (Payne & Smith, 2018).

Data from the U.S. Transgender Survey indicate that 82% of transgender individuals have considered killing themselves and 40% have attempted suicide (James et al., 2016). This lifetime suicide attempt rate of trans people is nearly 9 times greater than the general U.S. population (4.6%; Nock & Kessler, 2006). Within the transgender population, suicidality is highest among young people (James et al., 2016). In fact, mounting evidence suggests that upward of 40% of all trans individuals consider or attempt suicide during adolescence or young adulthood (James et al., 2016). Additionally, unequal experiences regarding school climate were reported when using an intersectional framework that considered gender, race, class, and disability as markers. For instance, there are limitations on the support offered to black and immigrant transgender and gender diverse youth by white teachers (Meyer, Tilland-Stafford & Airton, 2016). Trans people of color and trans people with disabilities have higher suicide rates related to gender discrimination than their white and non-disability counterparts (Seelman, 2016). This issue is quite literally one of life and death for trans youth.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study helped to uncover certain perceptions caregivers had of their trans children's elementary school experiences so that school leaders and other personnel might better understand how they can support this population of students. Key themes that are important for school personnel who want to create learning environments that facilitate all students' sense of belonging and reduce the constraints inherent in binary gender norms include the following: (a) institutional environment, (b) classroom practices, (c) gender policing, (d) the role of supportive people in the school community, (e) professional development for teachers, (f) a position of responsibility and vulnerability, (g) the effects of formal policies, (h) resistance to diverse gender identities, and (i) the effects of the political landscape on trans students' rights. As stated by Eka, Zoey's mom, "*A school community feels like an impenetrably* [cis] *heteronormative place that is, to some extent, about conformity*." Other participants in the study echoed this comment by sharing examples of the many ways in which their children's elementary schools reinforce traditional notions of gender. From the clothes they wear, to the toys they are offered, to the way they are seated or asked to line up, caregivers reported that their children's schools reinforced and reproduced cisnormative views of gender. Participants also mentioned that, in their experiences, the teachers seldom received professional development related to gender or to the needs of gender diverse students.

As a cisgender white female elementary school administrator, I recognize that I have a privileged position of power and thus a platform for challenging gender bias in schools and developing new norms. The idea for this study started when I began to ask myself the question, "*How can I make my school a supportive environment for trans students*?" In the following section, I applied what I learned from the research and the participants in this study to provide

proactive recommendations to make schools more inclusive for everyone, regardless of gender identity. District level, school level, and classroom level strategies are discussed.

District-Level Responsibilities

Targeted Professional Development for District and School Leaders. Research highlights the tendency of school leaders to see diversity work in terms of visible differences or individualized cases of abnormal identities and needs, rather than in terms of systemic marginalization and/or inequitable distributions of power (Payne & Smith, 2018). In terms of gender diversity, professional development and learning opportunities are often limited due to a common belief that learning about trans identities is relevant only to those who are in direct contact with a known trans student. The "invisibility" of trans students and families has led many school leaders to believe that professional learning opportunities about LGBTQIA+ issues are not necessary in their schools, because none of "those" kids were present in the school environment (Payne & Smith, 2018). This belief is problematic for two reasons: (1) Not all trans students are disclosed, and children are increasingly enrolling in schools without sharing their gender history with school personnel, and (2) The topic of gender is relevant for all people, since knowing about gender and the negative effects of gender stereotypes can lead to more inclusive educational practices (Mangin, 2020). Relying on individual children to be the catalyst for learning about trans identities can also situate the child and caregiver as the "poster family" for diverse gender identities, which places undue emphasis on one aspect of the student's identity, suggests that one child can be representative for an entire complex community, and forces the child and caregiver to unfairly shoulder the burden of educating cisgender adults in the school community (Mangin, 2020).

One proactive way to shift gendered practices is for districts to take a broader approach to learning about trans identities. Research suggests that district leaders and school administrators need to have opportunities to participate in professional development designed specifically for school leaders (Payne & Smith, 2018). The professional development should guide school leaders to begin moving away from the deficit model and should instead frame trans students as bringing value to the school community. At the most basic level, professional development must help school leaders stop assuming that all students and caregivers are cisgender. A focus on identities, rather than individuals, can help leaders understand that trans identities, like cisgender identities, exist and are to be expected. School leaders must learn to attend to gender more broadly and understand that not everyone feels like a boy or a girl. One simple way that school districts can make conceptual space and broaden awareness of diverse gender identities, is to include pronouns as part of a self-introduction. Professional development for school leaders must also provide opportunities for them to acknowledge and reflect upon their own biases and consider what supportive instructional methods and climate could look like for trans students. School leaders also need opportunities to learn about and recognize the need for continuously interrupting the exclusion and stigmatization of trans students in all areas of school life: curriculum, school culture, extracurricular activities, school ceremonies, and rituals (Payne & Smith, 2018).

Gender Audits. Understanding to what degree schools are inclusive of trans students, families, and issues is key to ensuring that schools are safe and affirming for all students. A gender audit identifies all of the ways in which binary gender is implicitly and explicitly reflected in schools. GLSEN provides a free “LGBTQ School Assessment Tool” on their website. Making this a collaborative effort, shared by stakeholders in the school community, can

initiate conversation about school norms and the ways that gender affects children's school experiences. A gender audit considers questions like the following: (a) Does gender influence how students are seated in classrooms, for performances, on field trips, or during lunch? (b) Do library books, textbooks, and curriculum resources feature trans children and gender-neutral pronouns? And (c) Are school forms gendered? Results from the audit should result in setting and monitoring specific goals aimed at improving gendered practices and disrupting binary gender norms.

Develop Formal Policies and Written Curriculum. School districts should also consider developing formal policies and written curriculum, which, when coupled with implementation, monitoring, and enforcement, can go a long way in decreasing teachers' fear of reprisals and increase their willingness to change existing practices. Educational consultants and school board associations have regional offices and staff dedicated to assisting school districts with writing, implementing, and monitoring board policy. The key here is to develop "living" policies and written curriculum that facilitate meaningful changes to school practices and that can be revised and/or adapted as new knowledge about trans children's lived experiences continues to evolve. Additionally, policies must shift away from an emphasis on a trans-affirmative discourse of inclusion and accommodation towards embracing gender-expansiveness as an ongoing, dynamic part of gender justice in schools - one that requires sustained attention and monitoring. Many policies, as they currently exist, fail to understand the specific lived experiences of children and youth in schools with gender expansive or agender identities. Policies that impose oppositional "binary" and "nonbinary" language fail to account for the trans youth that choose to identify in ways that confound such a binary catergorization (Martino et. al., 2020).

Banned Books. In 2022 Education Week released a report that identified at least 50 different groups involved in local and state-level efforts to ban books about and by LGBTQIA+ people and people of color (Pendharker, 2022). Additionally, PEN America found that, from July 2021 to June 2022, 674 titles that were banned explicitly address LGBTQIA+ themes or have protagonists or prominent secondary characters who are LGBTQIA+. As book bans in schools across the country escalate, it is important for school districts to have policies that protect the professional decisions of teachers in schools. Every school should have approved policies and procedures for choosing curriculum materials and responding when those materials are challenged (Knox, 2020).

School-Level Responsibilities

School principals have the responsibility of developing a school-wide approach for developing inclusive practices for trans students. Principals should communicate the leadership vision and support that many teachers feel that they need in order to feel confident that they have adequate administrative support to advocate for trans students without fear. They should provide mandatory, school-level professional development for teachers to grow educators' knowledge of and develop positive perceptions about trans students and the learning opportunities they bring to schools. Beyond teachers, school support staff- cafeteria aides, hall monitors, custodians, bus drivers, volunteers, and food service employees, to name a few- should also be included in professional learning related to trans students. In many school districts, professional development is planned at the district level; however, for principals who may be responsible for planning their own professional development sessions, GLSEN has free professional development resources available on their website.

Student Clubs and GSAs. For many trans students, student clubs that address LGBTQIA+ student issues (formally called Gay-Straight Alliances, and more commonly called Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSA) or Queer Clubs) offer critical support. These clubs are student-led, usually at the high school or middle school level, and work to address anti-LGBT name-calling, bullying and harassment in their schools and promote respect for all students. The existence of these clubs can make schools feel safer and more welcoming for trans students. GLSEN's National School Climate Survey has found that compared to LGBT students without a GSA, students in schools with a GSA or similar student club: (a) Reported hearing fewer homophobic and transphobic remarks. (b) Experienced less harassment and assault because of their sexual orientation and gender expression, (c) Were more likely to report incidents of harassment and assault, (d) Were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation or gender expression, (e) Were less likely to miss school because of safety concerns, and (f) Reported a greater sense of belonging to their school community. Participants in this study commented on the availability of GSAs at the middle and high school levels but noted the absence of them at the elementary level. Given the research regarding positive effects on trans students, elementary principals should consider establishing GSAs in their schools.

Classroom-Level Responsibilities

The Role of Teachers. If we want to shift gender norms in schools, certain practices need to be implemented broadly and sustained over time, beyond classrooms with known trans students. Practices include reducing the emphasis on binary gender categories (i.e., not sorting or organizing students by "boy/girl"), increasing conversations about gender, and adding books with gender-diverse characters to classroom libraries. Teachers directly influence children's school experiences through their classroom practices and interactions, and, knowing that

students' social emotional well-being is vital for their academic and life success, teachers can create inclusive spaces that contribute to trans students' sense of belonging and help cisgender students learn about and accept experiences that differ from their own. Just like school leaders, teachers need to understand that learning about gender is an important component of all children's learning.

Participants in this study commented on the importance of "safe spaces" signifying safety and inclusion for trans students. GLSEN provides a free "Safe Spaces" toolkit for educators on their website. The guide provides practical ways for educators to transform their schools into safer spaces for all students by supporting and educating students, sharing knowledge with other educators, and advocating for school-wide changes.

The Role of Students. When students have opportunities to discuss gender and gender norms at school, they learn how to challenge, rather than reinforce, binary gender norms. For many trans students, simply knowing that allies exist can be a source of support. Research shows that trans students with many supportive educators and classmates feel safer at school, skip fewer classes, and earn higher grades than students without supportive educators (GLSEN, 2019). One way that cisgender students can be allies is to learn not to assume someone's gender based on their physical appearance or gender expression. Children should be taught to introduce themselves with their pronouns and ask others what their pronouns are, instead of assuming. There are many age-appropriate children's picture books that explain pronouns to children in developmentally appropriate ways. "They, She, He, Free to Be!" is one such example.

Recommendations for Future Research

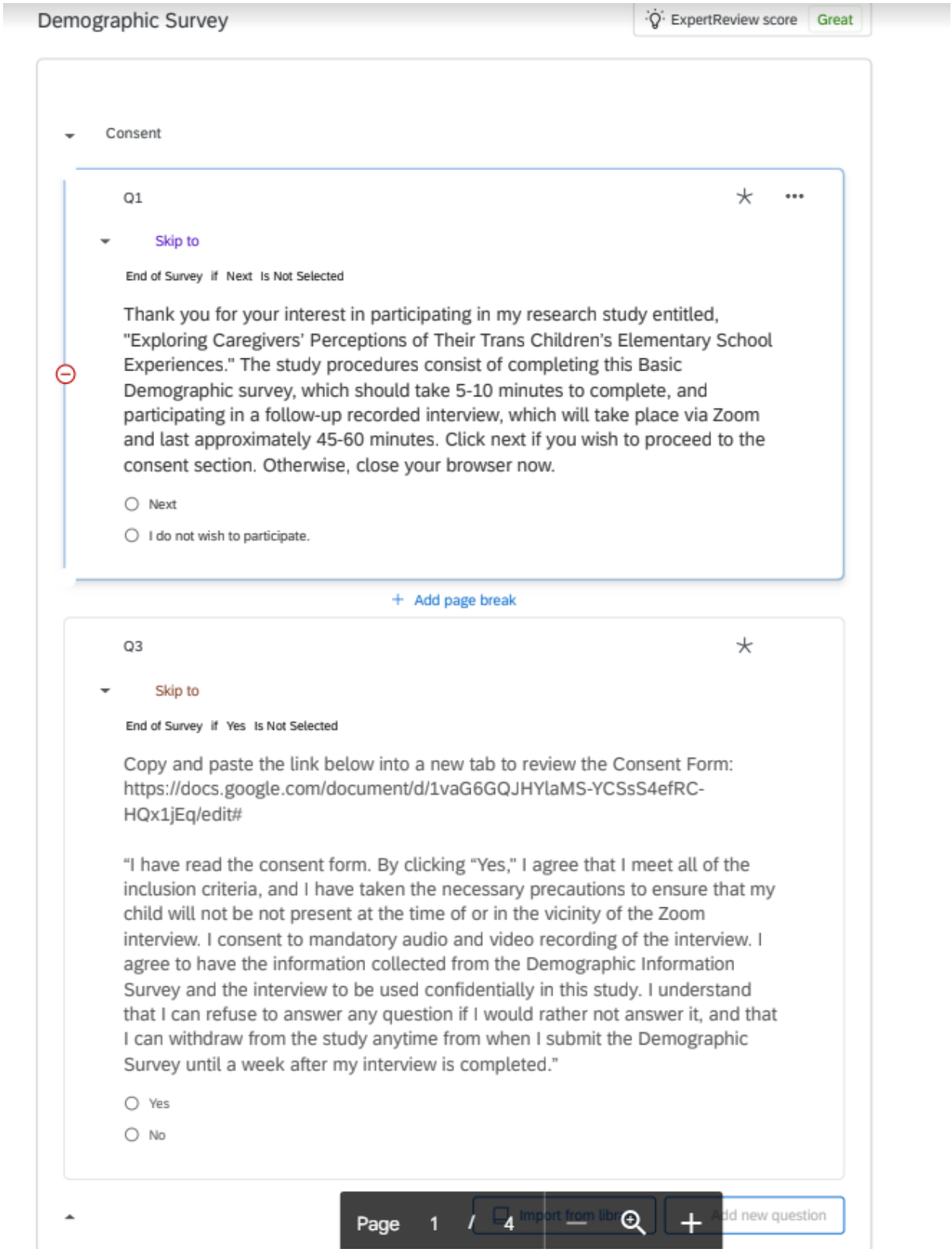
Results from this study yielded helpful information to better understand the perceptions caregivers had of their trans children's elementary school experiences. That being said, the number of studies evaluating school climate among trans youth, albeit increasing, is still very limited. When specifically considering the effects of interventions on school outcomes, the evidence is even more scarce. Recommendations for future research include conducting another study to include teachers and school leaders who have facilitated and/or supported social transitions of trans elementary school students. Speaking directly to teachers and school leaders would give insight into the gendered environments and/or classroom practices.

Additionally, recruiting participants from different geographic regions that would target different political contexts is critical. In 2019, 15 states included the optional transgender question in their Youth Risk Behavior Survey (TRBS). In doing so, these states added to the existing body of research by providing a glimpse of what percentage of their high school students identify as trans and providing data regarding these students' experiences and well-being (Valent & Zerbino, 2021). Notably, the states that included this question are completely distinct from the 20 states that filed lawsuits against the Biden administration, alleging that the administration had overstepped in extending anti-discrimination protections on the basis of gender identity (Valent & Zerbino, 2021). What this means, is that we have the least amount of data on trans students' experiences in the states that are the most hostile to them legislatively, and our ability to assess the mental health and needs of trans students should not be limited to Democratic states, or any other subset of states or districts.

Conclusion

As an administrator of a public elementary school in the United States, I sought to contribute to the existing body of knowledge by documenting differences and providing evidence of obstacles in order to improve access and opportunities for trans students, who are systematically denied safe, affirming, and equitable learning environments. Shifting a school culture to be gender-inclusive is a formidable task (Mangin, 2020), and we have a long way to go in ensuring that all students have educational experiences that are free from cisnormative messages of gender. Research documents the ways in which school leaders frame the trans student as the "problem" rather than acknowledging the institutional structures that reproduce White, cisgender, heteronormative, patriarchal ideas (Meyer, 2022). If we continue thinking this way, we will collect very different data and come to very different conclusions about how to solve the "problem." Instead, educational researchers and school leaders must reframe their examinations of gender in schools so that they can create truly equitable and liberatory educational environments (Meyer, 2022). The data presented and recommendations provided in this study are just a starting point. It is my hope that this study, along with the scholarship cited within, will support the development of a much more comprehensive and expansive field of trans studies in educational research. We should be going out of our way to ensure that trans students feel welcome and embraced, not excluded and ostracized.

Appendix A: Demographic Survey



Demographic Information

Q5

What is your email address?

Q6

How do you describe your gender identity?

Q7

What are your pronouns?

Q9

What terms do you and/or your child use to describe your child's gender identity? If you choose "other" please include additional descriptors.

- ○ Trans
- ○ Gender Non-binary
- ○ Gender Expansive
- ○ Other

Q10

Which pronouns do you use to describe your child?

Q11

In which geographic region is your child's school located?

- ○ New England Region
- ○ Mid-Atlantic Region
- ○ Southern Region
- ○ Mid-West Region
- ○ South-West Region
- ○ Pacific Coastal Region

Q12

How would you describe the type of school?

- ○ Public
- ○ Public-Charter
- ○ Private-Independent
- ○ Private-Religious

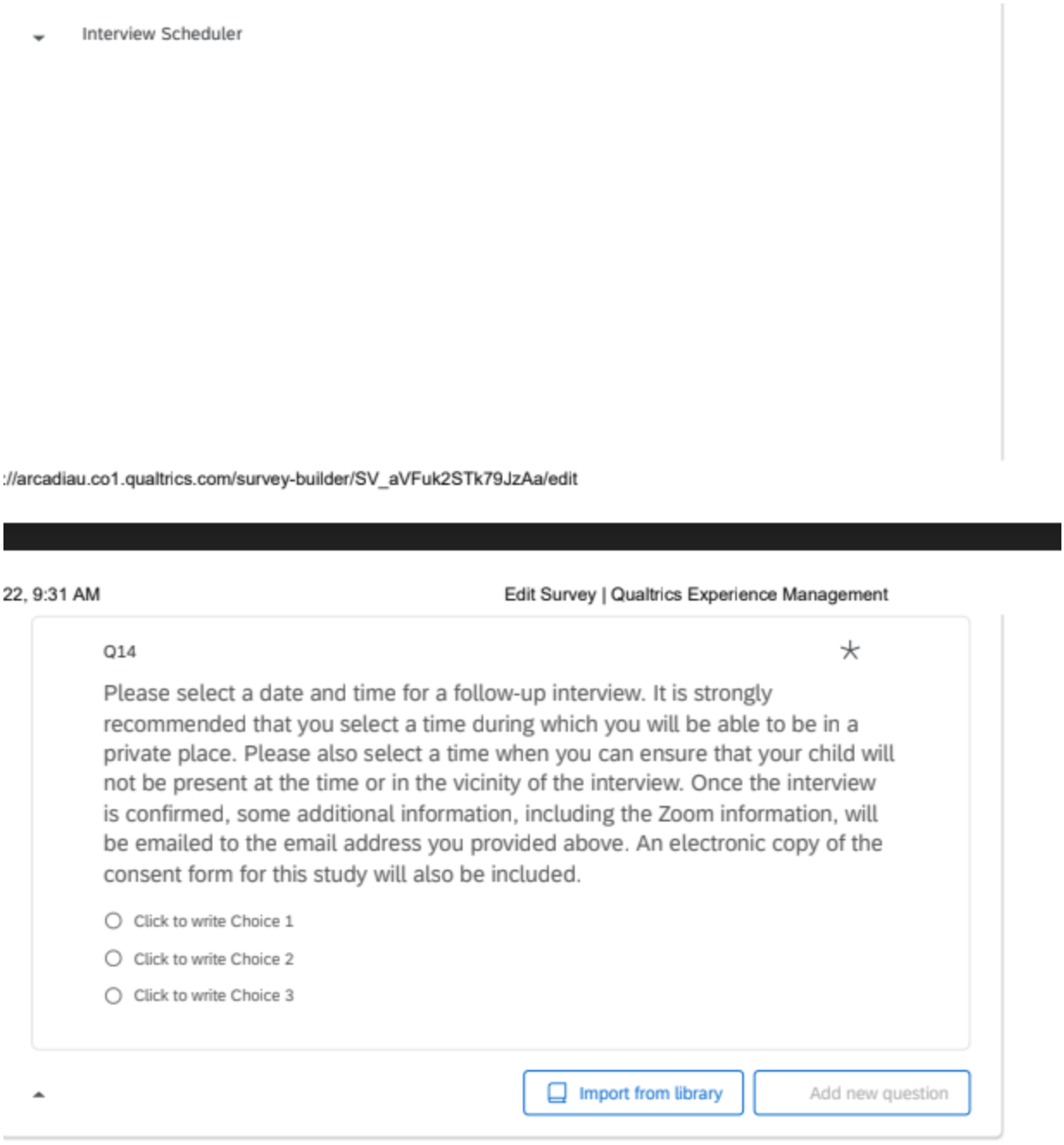
Q13

Is the school in an urban, suburban, or rural area?

- ○ Urban
- ○ Suburban
- ○ Rural

Import from library | Add new question

Add Block


Interview Scheduler
://arcadiau.co1.qualtrics.com/survey-builder/SV_aVFuk2STk79JzAa/edit
22, 9:31 AM
Edit Survey | Qualtrics Experience Management
Q14
Please select a date and time for a follow-up interview. It is strongly recommended that you select a time during which you will be able to be in a private place. Please also select a time when you can ensure that your child will not be present at the time or in the vicinity of the interview. Once the interview is confirmed, some additional information, including the Zoom information, will be emailed to the email address you provided above. An electronic copy of the consent form for this study will also be included.
Click to write Choice 1
Click to write Choice 2
Click to write Choice 3
Import from library
Add new question

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Date of interview:
Time of interview:

Interviewee:

PART I. INSTRUCTIONS

Good afternoon. My name is Kylene Phillips. I am a current Educational Leadership Doctoral student from Arcadia University and an administrator at an elementary school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. As part of my dissertation I am conducting interviews with caregivers of trans children to learn more about the children's elementary school experiences. The purpose of my study is to learn more about the lived experiences of trans children who are attending elementary schools. Specifically, I'm interested in hearing about your perceptions of the school environment and whether the environment affirmed or rejected your child's gender identity.

Thank you for agreeing to participate. Prior to today's interview you have signed an electronic consent form, which stated the following:

1. All information will be held confidential. Neither your nor your child's real names will be collected. The name of your child's school will also not be collected. I want to remind you again now not to use any real names of people or places. ***What first name would you like to use for the purpose of this study? [wait for participant to answer]*** Any real names that are accidentally disclosed during this interview will be changed to pseudonyms when the recording is transcribed.
2. You have also acknowledged an understanding that minors cannot participate in this study and that you have taken the necessary precautions to ensure that your child is not present at the time of or in the vicinity of this Zoom interview. I would like to ask you to verbally affirm that your child is not present or in the vicinity of this interview. **Please say, "I affirm that my child is not present at the time of or in the vicinity of this interview." [wait for participant to answer]**

3. Your participation is voluntary, you can refuse to answer any question if you would rather not answer it, and you can withdraw from the study anytime until a week after this interview is completed.
4. I do not intend to inflict any harm. I have planned for this interview to last no more than one hour, and I will be recording the audio and video. The purpose of this is so that I can remember all of the details and be able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. I assure you that all your comments will remain confidential. The results of the study may be published in professional journals or shared in professional conferences; however, identifying information would be excluded. Additionally, all recordings will be deleted once they have been transcribed. After hearing this, would you still like to continue with the interview? [if *yes* start the recording]

Family/ Parenting

1. I understand that you are parenting a child who has a diverse gender identity.
    a. Does your child use the name that was assigned at birth, or does your child use a different name?
2. Can you tell me about your family structure?
    a. Who lives with you?
    b. Does your child have any siblings?
3. How old was your child when they communicated with you that they were questioning their gender?
    a. How did you respond to what your child communicated to you?
        i. Are there any specific events that stand out in your mind?

School Demographics

1. Can you tell me what grades the school is composed of (i.e. K-3, K-6, K-8)?
    a. In what grade is your child currently?
    b. In what grade was your child when you enrolled [child's pronoun] in the school?

c. Did you disclose your child's gender identity when you enrolled [child's pronoun]?

If YES, then

i. Can you tell me more about that decision? Who was the most supportive and how did they show support?

ii. Can you tell me a bit about the policies of the school? Were you permitted to register using your child's preferred name and pronouns? Did you have to provide legal documentation to do so?

iii. Are your child's birth name and original gender markers still part of the school record?

If NO…then

iv. At what age/grade did your child begin to socially transition at school?

v. What was that like?

vi. Who was the most supportive? How did they show support?

2. Did you communicate your child's gender identity/ child's transitioning to the school community? With whom did you communicate?
3. Some of the literature I've read documents parents' attempts to balance the pride they have for their children with their fears regarding privacy and safety. Was this something you thought about?
    a. Were you worried about your child's safety at school because of [child's pronoun] gender identity?
    b. Are there any specific events related to your child's safety at school that stand out in your mind?
4. How have you encountered resistance to your child's gender identity from those in the school community?
5. What practices/policies are in place at the school to support your child?
    a. Are they working? Why or why not?

Experiences with School Personnel

6. What messages have you received from school personnel about your child's gender identity?
7. What experiences have you had with school personnel that surprised you?
8. What has been your experience with teachers' comfort levels in working with gender diverse students? Please explain.
9. What have been your experiences with regard to teachers and school personnel?
    a. Was there a person who was the most supportive? If so, how did they show support?
    b. Was there a person who was the least supportive? In what ways were they unsupportive of your child's gender identity?
    c. Are there any particular characteristics that you associate with teachers who are interested in supporting your child? What about those who were unsupportive?
10. What has it been like for your child with regard to friends?
    a. What has it been like with the caregivers of your child's friends?

Classroom Practices & Gendered Spaces

11. What gendered classroom management strategies have you witnessed, or has your child reported experiencing? (i.e. gendered bathroom passes, seating arrangements, etc.)
    a. Have you heard school personnel refer to the students as "boys and girls?"
12. What opportunities has your child had to discuss gender and gender norms at school?
    a. What do you think the effects of legislation like Florida's "Don't Say Gay" Bill will be on trans students, particularly those in elementary schools?
13. What, if any, changes have you seen with regard to modifying gendered spaces at the school (like bathrooms, puberty lessons, dress codes) to make them more accessible to a broader range of students?
14. What advice do you have for schools who want to help and support children like yours?
    a. What do you think school employees need to know to support children like yours?

15. Is there anything that you have not shared with me or that I have not asked you about that you would like to say now?

POST INTERVIEW COMMENTS AND/OR OBSERVATIONS

Thank you for your participation. I want to remind you that you can withdraw from the study anytime within the next week by emailing me at kphillips_02@arcadia.edu. I will copy and paste my email address in the chat box now, so that you have it.

Would you like to receive a copy of the final work? If so, I will send it to the email address you provided in the demographic survey.

Appendix C: Message to Group Administrators

Hi [Administrator's Name],

My name is Kylene Phillips. I am a current Educational Leadership Doctoral student at Arcadia University and an administrator at an elementary school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. My dissertation committee chair is Dr. Graciela Slesaransky-Poe, Professor and Founding Dean (2014-2016), School of Education at Arcadia University (email: SlesaranskyPoe@arcadia.edu).

As part of my dissertation, I am exploring caregivers' perceptions of their trans children's elementary school experiences through semi-structured interviews, and I am seeking your help in recruiting participants who might be interested in participating in my research study. I was hoping that you would be willing to post my recruitment message on your Facebook group's, [group name], page.

I would be happy to answer any questions you might have about my dissertation. You can reach me by responding to this message or by emailing me at kphillips_02@arcadia.edu.

Thanks!

Kylene Phillips

Appendix D: Recruitment Message

Dear Prospective Study Participant,

My name is Kylene Phillips. I am a current Educational Leadership Doctoral student at Arcadia University and an administrator at an elementary school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. My dissertation committee chair is Dr. Graciela Slesaransky-Poe, Professor and Founding Dean (2014-2016), School of Education at Arcadia University (email: SlesaranskyPoe@arcadia.edu).

As part of my dissertation, entitled "Exploring Caregivers' Perceptions of Their Trans Children's Elementary School Experiences," I am conducting interviews with caregivers of trans children to learn more about the children's elementary school experiences. The purpose of my study is to learn more about the lived experiences of trans children who are attending elementary schools. Specifically, I'm interested in hearing about your perceptions of the school environment and whether the environment affirmed or rejected your child's gender identity.

To participate in this study, you must meet the following criteria:
Criterion #1**:** You must be a caregiver (of at least 18 years of age) who has parented a trans—having a gender identity that is gender non-binary or transgender—child of 11 years of age or younger within the past five years.
Criterion #2**:** Your child must attend or have previously attended an elementary school in the United States within the past five years.
Criterion #3**:** You must indicate a gender-affirmative parenting stance with respect to your trans child (i.e. a nonjudgmental approach that respects and supports the child's gender identity).

Please note that minors, including your child, cannot participate in this study.

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. This research study has been approved by Arcadia University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), Study #1853633-3.

If interested in participating in the research, please click the link below. You will be directed to an electronic consent form, which outlines the risks and benefits to participation. If you consent to participate, you will be asked to complete a brief demographic information survey, which will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. You will also be asked to schedule a time for a 45-60 minute recorded interview, which will take place via Zoom. Once you complete the Zoom interview, you will be finished with your responsibilities as a participant.

If you do not meet the participation requirements, but you know someone who does, please share this information with them, including those who may not have an online social media presence.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, please don't hesitate to email me at kphillips_02@arcadia.edu.

Link to Consent Form, Demographic Information Survey, and Interview Scheduler:
https://arcadiau.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_aVFuk2STk79JzAa

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
Kylene Phillips

Appendix E: Consent Form

Kylene Phillips, Arcadia Doctoral Student

Dear Prospective Participant,

My name is Kylene Phillips. I am a current Educational Leadership Doctoral student at Arcadia University and an administrator at an elementary school in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. My dissertation committee chair is Dr. Graciela Slesaransky-Poe, Professor and Founding Dean (2014-2016), School of Education at Arcadia University (email: SlesaranskyPoe@arcadia.edu).

Purpose:
As part of my dissertation, entitled "Exploring Caregivers' Perceptions of Their Trans Children's Elementary School Experiences," I am conducting interviews with caregivers of trans children to learn more about the children's elementary school experiences. The purpose of my study is to learn more about the lived experiences of trans children who are attending elementary schools. Specifically, I'm interested in hearing about your perceptions of the school environment and whether the environment affirmed or rejected your child's gender identity.

Inclusion Criteria:
To participate in this study, you must meet the following criteria:

Criterion #1**:** You must be a caregiver (of at least 18 years of age) who has parented a trans—having a gender identity that is gender non-binary or transgender—child of 11 years of age or younger within the past five years.
Criterion #2**:** Your child must attend or have previously attended an elementary school in the United States within the past five years.
Criterion #3**:** You must indicate a gender-affirmative parenting stance with respect to your trans child (i.e. a nonjudgmental approach that respects and supports the child's gender identity).

Please note that minors, including your trans child, cannot participate in this study. Below you will be asked to acknowledge this statement and agree to take the necessary precautions to ensure that your child is not present at the time or in the vicinity of the Zoom interview.

Participation in this research study is completely voluntary. This research study has been approved by Arcadia University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), Study #[1853633-3].

Study Procedures/ Data Collection:
Participation entails completing a brief Demographic Survey (5-10 minutes), consisting of open-ended and multiple choice questions designed to gather information about your and your child's gender identities, pronouns, and type and location of your child's school. You will also be asked to provide electronic consent to participate in the study and schedule a 45-60 minute recorded interview, which will take place via Zoom. Information collected from your interview will be assessed with information from other participants to improve understanding of trans students' elementary school experiences. **The interviews will be audio and video recorded. Below you will provide consent for the mandatory audio and video recording of the interview.** Once you complete the Zoom interview, you will be finished with your responsibilities as a participant.

Benefits, Risks, and Protections:
There are no direct benefits to you, as a participant in this research study. There is no financial compensation for participation in this study. The potential findings of the study will contribute to the important body of literature on this topic.

The greatest risk is the potential for your and/or your children's identities to be unintentionally disclosed. To address such a situation, neither your nor your children's real names will be collected. The names of your children's schools will also not be collected. In the introduction to the interview, you will be reminded not to use any real names (e.g. child, school), and you will be asked: *What first name would you like to use for the purpose of this study?* Any real names that are accidentally disclosed during the interview will be changed to pseudonyms when the recording is transcribed.

Your location during the interview could also be a risk, if you are in a public place where others can hear the questions and/or answers. To address this concern, you are strongly encouraged to schedule your interview for a time in which you are able to be in a private place. You are also strongly encouraged to wear a headset, which will provide more privacy during the conversation.

Minors cannot participate in this study. Since there is a chance that your trans child could be present at the time of or in the vicinity of the Zoom interview and could, consequently, participate in the interview conversation, you will be asked to acknowledge that you have taken the necessary precautions to ensure that your child is not present at the time of or in the vicinity of the Zoom interview. Additionally, during the introduction of the Zoom interview, you will be explicitly reminded that minors cannot participate in the study and be asked to give a verbal acknowledgement that your child is not present at the time of or in the vicinity of the Zoom interview.

You may withdraw from the study anytime from when you submit the Demographic Survey until a week after your interview is completed. You have the right to refuse to answer any question without penalty. To withdraw, email the researcher at kphillips_02@arcadia.edu to state your desire to withdraw from the study.

Conclusion:
The results of this study may be presented at professional meetings. It may be published in a professional journal. If you wish to see a copy of the final work, send a request to kphillips_02@arcadia.edu.

"I have read the consent form. By clicking "Yes" at the bottom of the screen, I agree that I meet all of the inclusion criteria, and I have taken the necessary precautions to ensure that my child will not be present at the time of or in the vicinity of the Zoom interview. I consent to mandatory audio and video recording of the interview. I agree to have the information collected from the Demographic Information Survey and the interview to be used confidentially in this study. I understand that I can refuse to answer any question if I would rather not answer it, and that I can withdraw from the study anytime from when I submit the Demographic Survey until a week after my interview is completed."

This study protocol was approved by the Arcadia University Institutional Review Board (IRB). To ensure that this research continues to protect your rights and minimize your risk, the IRB reserves the right to examine and evaluate the data and research protocols involved in this study. If you desire additional information regarding your rights in this research study, you may contact the Office of Research Subject Protection at 267-620-4111. If you have any questions or comments, please contact the principal investigator or faculty advisor:

Principal Investigator: Kylene Phillips- kphillips_02@arcadia.edu

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Graceila Slesaransky-Poe- SlesaranskyPoe@arcadia.edu

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