

EFFECTIVE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND (TRANS)FORMING THE K-12
EDUCATION (CIS)TEM

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ABSTRACT

EFFECTIVE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND (TRANS)FORMING THE K-12 EDUCATION (CIS)TEM

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This research addresses the critical need for supporting transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) students within K-12 public schools, recognizing the detrimental effects of overlooking their unique needs. Current policies often fail to address these needs adequately, leading to mental health challenges and negative educational outcomes. The study aims to identify the key factors influencing the successful implementation of transgender-supportive policies in schools. A review of current research underscores the importance of challenging existing gender-binary norms and promoting inclusivity for TGNC students. By creating affirming spaces and addressing systemic barriers, schools can foster a safe and supportive environment for TGNC youth, ultimately leading to more positive educational experiences and outcomes. Trans studies, queer pedagogy, and transgender theory collectively advocate for a nuanced understanding of gender within educational and societal frameworks. They challenge traditional educational structures that frame transgender individuals as problematic and instead emphasize gender self-determination, ambiguity, and the rejection of binary views. Utilizing an online survey and semi-structured interview in a mixed-methods approach, data was collected from school administrators across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to better understand their experiences in enacting trans-supportive policies and the impact the implementation of these policies has on TGNC students. This study contributes to the growing body of research on

supporting TGNC students in educational settings, highlighting the necessity for continued efforts to dismantle cisnormativity and promote inclusivity across the gender spectrum. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu>) and OhioLINK ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

Keywords: transgender, gender non-conforming, inclusivity, affirming spaces, gender binary, cisnormativity, queer pedagogy, transgender theory, gender spectrum

Dedication

For O and J who unknowingly sparked the passion that started me on this journey. For K and K who were the first to tell me I could do this and helping me believe it. For Mr. Hudson, who got me accustomed to an enormous amount of reading and writing, and pre-congratulated me on multiple graduations years before many of them were even an idea in my head. For all the TGNC kids who deserved better than the world was ready to give them while they were here.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	xii
List of Figures	xiii
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of Problem/Background	1
Relationship to Topic	1
Research Question	3
Purpose Statement.....	3
Importance of Study.....	4
Researcher Assumptions	5
Limitations and Delimitations.....	6
Definition of Terms.....	6
Chapter Summary	9
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	11
Theoretical Framework.....	12
Gender Identity	14
Gender Identity Development.....	14
Gender Expression	15
Names and Pronouns.....	16
Gender in Schools	17
School Climate.....	17
School Staff.....	20
Risk and Protective Factors	22
Legislation and Policy.....	24

Best Practices	26
Summary and Conclusions	31
Implications for Practice	33
Gaps in the Research.....	34
Suggestions for Future Research	35
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	37
Research Paradigm.....	37
Rationale for Choice of Methodology	37
Recruitment of Participants.....	39
Collection of Data	40
Data Analysis	41
Ethical Protections	41
Role of the Researcher	43
Timeline	44
Chapter Summary	45
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND FINDINGS.....	46
Quantitative Results	46
Sample.....	46
Data	49
Qualitative Findings.....	66
Sample.....	66
Themes	68
Theme 1: General Acceptance and Inclusivity	68
Theme 2: Perspective Differences	69

Theme 3: Informality vs. Formality in Policies	70
Theme 4: Community and Political Constraints	71
Theme 5: Adaptability and Incremental Progress	73
Integration of Quantitative Results and Qualitative Findings.....	73
Summary	74
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH.....	76
Summary of the Study	76
Implications.....	77
Social Justice Implications.....	78
Equity and Inclusion	79
Mental Health and Well-Being	79
Legal and Civil Rights Protections	79
Broader Social Change	80
Limitations	80
Recommendations.....	81
Considerations for Future Research.....	81
School Recommendations.....	83
Conclusions and Reflection	84
REFERENCES	86
APPENDIX A: LETTER OF RECRUITMENT	92
APPENDIX B: ONLINE SURVEY PROTOCOL	93
APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT.....	100
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE	103

List of Tables

Table 4.1 Respondent Demographic Information.....	47
Table 4.2 Included School/District Information	49
Table 4.3 Likert Scale Data	50
Table 4.4 Test of Normality	52
Table 4.5 Descriptive Statistics.....	54
Table 4.6 Chi-Square Test, Region.....	56
Table 4.7 Chi-Square Test, Area.....	57
Table 4.8 Chi-Square Test, Socio-Economic Status.....	59
Table 4.9 Chi-Square Test, Diversity	60
Table 4.10 Interviewee Data	66

List of Figures

Figure 4.1 Area x Explicit Position Statement Regarding DEI	62
Figure 4.2 Diversity x Explicit Position Statement Regarding DEI	63
Figure 4.3 Area x Operational DEI Committee	63
Figure 4.4 Diversity x Operational DEI Committee	64
Figure 4.5 Area x GSA	64
Figure 4.6 Diversity x GSA	65

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem/Background

Youth spend a significant percentage of their time in schools. These institutions are charged not only with teaching academic content, but also with promoting the social and emotional well-being and growth of their students, charged with guiding the next generation and thereby shaping the future of society. The complexity of this task varies based on the needs of the individual students or groups of students. One group in particular meriting attention is students who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming (TGNC). These students may identify as a binary gender different from their biological sex as determined at birth, or they may identify somewhere outside the familiar male/female binary. These students are a subgroup of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) population, yet are rarely the central focus of the research. Instead, sexual orientation and gender identity are often considered together, not as separate constructs (Day et al., 2018). However, the available research points to a startlingly high occurrence of mental health concerns, substance abuse, self-harm, and negative school outcomes in TGNC youth (McGuire et al., 2010). Thus, it is vital this group's unique needs be considered more specifically when examining policies and procedures designed to support students in K-12 education settings (Parodi et al., 2022).

Relationship to Topic

As a school counselor, I have worked with many transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) students throughout my career. Their presence in schools is becoming increasingly visible, and in hindsight, I have come to realize I have been working with these students for far longer than I was aware. I have observed my colleagues, seasoned educators, struggle to know how best to support these students. I have watched these youth struggle to express themselves

comfortably, advocate for themselves in areas other students do not need to, resign themselves to being viewed as “other.” I have recognized a distinct lack of policy, protocol, and procedure designed specifically to support these students. This is especially the case when a school/district is not aware of the presence of TGNC student(s) within their educational system (Martino, 2022).

One student, in particular, ignited my passion for supporting TGNC youth, as I witnessed him fight to be allowed to use the restroom that aligns with his gender, to be consistently referred to by his name, to be acknowledged for who he is as a person. Near the end of the school year, as I was preparing notes to provide to the counselor at the building to which my students were matriculating, I asked this student what, if anything, he would like me to share with his new school regarding his name, gender, or anything else. With a look of gratitude and amazement, as well as incredulity and relief, he informed me no one had ever offered to share his story for him, no one had attempted to introduce him as he was so on the first day of school, he could be himself without requiring any explanation. This was the moment I realized how important this work is and how much there is to do.

Since that time, I have spent countless hours conferencing with district administration and speaking publicly at School Board meetings. I have been disheartened at the news our district solicitor believes our current policies are “good enough” because they are broad and thus should apply to all students. I have been encouraged by the eventual adoption of an Administrative Regulation regarding the use of “preferred” names and pronouns. I have witnessed my district move ever so slowly in the right direction, all while watching federal regulations waver back and forth in recent years. There is much work to be done to support TGNC students and this research aims to take another small step in the right direction.

Research Question

One central question guides this research: What factors influence the successful implementation of transgender-supportive policies in K-12 public school settings? More specifically, the research will explore how administrative support, educator beliefs and attitudes, community engagement, student involvement, and local, state, and national politics influence the successful implementation of these policies. Additionally, variations across geographic regions and across school levels (elementary, middle, and high school) will be examined.

Purpose Statement

School policies and infrastructure typically enforce gender segregation, as is the case with school bathrooms, locker rooms, and dress codes (Greytak et al., 2013). These policies presume all students fall into strict binary categories of boy/girl. However, many students do not identify within this dichotomy. Transgender, non-binary, and gender-creative youth have become increasingly visible in schools in recent years (Meyer & Leonardi, 2018). As a result, educators are faced with the challenge of improving their practice to best support students with an ever-growing diversity of gender expression.

Unfortunately, the transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) youth population is often functionally invisible in schools until a student makes their presence and gender diverse status known (Horton, 2023). Policies typically are not developed until the school is aware of the presence of a TGNC student. This mindset relies on an expectation that TGNC youth be “out” before positive change can happen; it places the focus of the problem on the students themselves, not on the educational system entrenched in a culture of cisnormativity (Meyer & Leonardi, 2018; Omercajic & Martino, 2020). Horton (2023) describes this institutional cisnormativity as going unnoticed by cisgender educators, while it simultaneously places trans pupils in a constant

state of alert and perpetual stress, an additional factor impacting school success and overall well-being. Additionally, when policies are enacted to support TGNC students, they often focus on the individual student(s) as opposed to addressing the structural inequalities that sustain trans erasure in the first place (Martino et al., 2022). This may result in potential harm when change is sparked by the presence of a known or assumed TGNC student as new trainings, policies, practices, and curricular materials are likely to be linked solely to that student, as opposed to being viewed as something from which all students will benefit (Meyer & Leonardi, 2018).

McCabe and Anhalt (2022) propose increasing and actively enforcing policies and practices that promote the safety and inclusion of TGNC youth, a change in the narrative to address systemic barriers currently hindering TGNC youth. Educators must learn and understand TGNC students will be in their classrooms and schools, whether they are aware of them or not. If a universal approach is implemented, educators will not be left scrambling to support individual students due to a lack of institutional supports (Meyer & Leonardi, 2018).

Importance of Study

GLSEN (2022) reports more than 80% of LGBTQ+ students observed peers making negative remarks specifically about transgender people, while less than 10% of these students reported their school or district having official policies in place specifically to support transgender or nonbinary students. Furthermore, Connor and Atkinson (2022) note “the adoption of equitable policies does not ensure successful implementation” (p. 99). Thus, even in education systems where policy exists, it must be explored whether or not the policy is effectively applied on a regular basis.

Kingsbury et al. (2022) cite a 5 times greater risk of suicidal ideation and 7.6 times greater risk of suicide attempt in TGNC youth as compared to their cisgender peers. The

literature correlates this statistic with TGNC students' feelings of safety and school belonging, which in turn, are correlated with the existence and implementation of transgender-supportive school policies. Hence, working to ensure successful policy development and implementation with fidelity aims to not only improve the lives of TGNC youth but to save them, as well.

Ensuring policies are not only present, but explicit and implemented with fidelity could mean the difference between life and death for TGNC youth.

Researcher Assumptions

This research relies on multiple assumptions. I assume educators understand the concept of transgender-supportive policies, will understand the questions with which they are presented, and will answer with candor. I expect participants will not conceal or otherwise disguise personal feelings toward the transgender community and will openly share their opinions, both positive and negative. I also assume participants will feel freely able to respond to questions and not coerced in any way to participate in the study.

I believe I will find a majority of schools/districts lack specifically transgender-supportive policies in the absence of one or more known transgender students. I think where policies do exist, the extent to which they are implemented will vary based on multiple factors, such as educators' personal attitudes and feelings, administrative support and accountability requirements, and community values. I also believe policy will vary in both prevalence and specificity across elementary, middle, and high school levels. I expect policy existence will be positively correlated with student age, with very limited presence at the elementary level. Similarly, I expect policy implementation will occur with greater fidelity when staff hold positive attitudes toward transgender people, as well as when administrative support and oversight are more pronounced. Unfortunately, I also expect the opposite to hold true when

districts and/or stakeholders harbor negative feelings and attitudes toward TGNC youth, even if subconsciously.

Limitations and Delimitations

All research is subject to both limitations (weaknesses that may influence outcomes and conclusions of the study) and delimitations (boundaries set to both include and exclude certain data from a study). This study is no exception. The participant sample is limited to public school employees across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. While a relatively diverse state in and of itself, caution must be taken in generalizing results to a greater geographic region. Additionally, as data will rely on participant self-report of policy awareness and implementation, as well as personal attitude toward TGNC youth, it is thus subject to reporter bias. This study is delimited in that it does not intend to consider the intersectionality of TGNC status with other characteristics such as race or socioeconomic status, although it acknowledges many TGNC students are multiply marginalized and this may impact them in more complex ways. Perhaps the most prominent delimitation is the lack of inclusion of the direct voice of TGNC youth themselves. As youth are a protected class, it is important to ensure their safety and protect against any potential harm. Therefore, the decision was made to work directly with educators in this research study, as opposed to directly with TGNC youth. It is the hope that examining policy existence and implementation will lead to further examination in the future of the direct impact of this on TGNC youth.

Definition of Terms

Affirmed gender: An individual's true gender, as opposed to their gender assigned at birth.

This term should replace terms like new gender or chosen gender, which imply that an individual chooses their gender (PFLAG, 2023).

Cisgender (pronounced sis-gender): A term used to refer to an individual whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned to them at birth (PFLAG, 2023).

Cisnormativity: The assumption that everyone is cisgender and that being cisgender is superior to all other genders. This includes the often implicitly held idea that being cisgender is the norm and that other genders are “different” or “abnormal” (PFLAG, 2023).

Cissexism: Prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination on the basis of sex, specifically towards transgender and gender non-conforming people (PFLAG, 2023).

Deadnaming: When an individual, intentionally or not, refers to the name that a transgender or gender non-conforming individual used at a different time in their life. Some may prefer the terms birth name, given name, or old name (PFLAG, 2023).

Gender: A set of social, physical, psychological, and emotional traits, often influenced by societal expectations, that classify an individual as feminine, masculine, androgynous or other (Lambda Legal, n.d.).

Gender binary: A system in which gender is constructed into two strict categories of male or female. Gender identity is expected to align with the sex assigned at birth and gender expressions and roles fit traditional expectations (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).

Gender expression: External appearance of one’s gender identity, usually expressed through behavior, clothing, body characteristics, or voice, and which may or may not conform to socially defined behaviors and characteristics typically associated with being either masculine or feminine (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).

Gender identity: An individual's inner sense of being male, female, or another gender. Gender identity is not necessarily the same as sex assigned or presumed at birth. Everyone has a gender identity (Lambda Legal, n.d.).

Gender non-conforming: Behaving in a way that does not match social stereotypes about female or male gender, usually through dress or physical appearance (Lambda Legal, n.d.).

Genderfluid: Describes a person who does not consistently adhere to one fixed gender and who may move among genders (PFLAG, 2023).

Misgender: To refer to an individual using a word, especially a pronoun or form of address, which does not correctly reflect their gender. This may be unintentional and without ill intent or can be a maliciously employed expression of bias. Regardless of intent, misgendering has a harmful impact (PFLAG, 2023).

Nonbinary: An adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).

Pronouns: The words used to refer to a person other than their name. Common pronouns are they/them, he/him, and she/her. Neopronouns are pronouns created specifically to be gender neutral, including xe/xem, ze/zir, and fae/faer (PFLAG, 2023).

Sex (also referred to as biological sex): Refers to anatomical, physiological, genetic, or physical attributes that determine if a person is male, female, or intersex. These include both primary and secondary sex characteristics, including genitalia, gonads, hormone levels, hormone receptors, chromosomes, and genes. Often also referred to as "physical sex," "anatomical sex," or "sex

assigned at birth.” Biological sex is often conflated or interchanged with gender, which is more societal than biological, and involves personal identity factors (PFLAG, 2023).

Sexual orientation: An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people. Note: an individual’s sexual orientation is independent of their gender identity (Human Rights Campaign, n.d.).

Transgender: Often shortened to trans, from the Latin prefix for “on a different side as.” A term describing a person’s gender identity that does not necessarily match their assigned sex at birth. Transgender people may or may not decide to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically to match their gender identity. This word is also used as an umbrella term to describe groups of people who transcend conventional expectations of gender identity or expression (PFLAG, 2023).

Transphobia: Animosity, hatred, or dislike of trans and gender non-conforming people that often manifests itself in the form of prejudice and bias. Transphobia often stems from lack of knowledge about transgender people and the issues they face and can be alleviated with education and support (PFLAG, 2023).

Chapter Summary

This research addresses the need for transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) students’ support in K-12 public schools. It highlights how current policies often overlook the unique needs of these students, leading to mental health issues and negative school outcomes. The study aims to understand the factors influencing the successful implementation of transgender-supportive policies in schools, including administrative support, teacher attitudes, community engagement, student involvement, and political influences. The purpose is to

challenge existing gender-binary policies and promote inclusivity for TGNC students. The research emphasizes the importance of addressing systemic barriers and the potential life-saving impact of supportive policies. However, it also acknowledges limitations and delimitations, such as the geographical scope and the absence of direct input from TGNC youth. The next chapter will include a comprehensive review of the literature relating to this subject, as a precursor to setting up the specific methods for the research study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolving understanding of gender, backed by scientific evidence, challenges the simplistic binary categorization of individuals into ‘male’ and ‘female’ (Herald, 2005). Within and between these terms lies a convolution of biology, chromosomes, and hormones that often make such dichotomous labeling difficult. Originally intended as an umbrella term for anyone who does not easily fit into a strict binary system of gender, the term *transgender* embraces the complexity of the gender spectrum (Keenan, 2017), its definition unique to each individual (Leonard, 2022).

In schools across the nation, as increasingly more students are feeling supported to publicly identify as transgender (Leonard, 2022), the experiences of these youth are varied and often challenging as they are “confronted by schools that are ill-equipped to support them” (Meyer & Keenan, 2018, p. 736). Some educators lack the awareness or experience necessary to promote trans-inclusive schools, while other school environments are openly hostile toward this group (Meyer & Keenan, 2018). The consequences of a student’s unwillingness or inability to conform to societal gender norms are profound, often resulting in social stigma and victimization. Schools, acting as enforcers of a pervasive ‘gender regime’ contribute to the marginalization of gender diverse young people through dress codes, gendered curricular areas, and the enforcement of culturally ingrained scripts centered around cisnormativity (Ullman, 2017).

The issues faced by transgender youth intersect with broader discussions on inclusivity, particularly within the context of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) protections. While strides have been made in understanding and addressing the challenges faced by LGB students, the unique marginalization experienced by transgender youth often goes unaddressed. Existing

policies designed to protect LGB individuals may not extend the necessary safeguards based on gender identity or expression (McGuire et al., 2010). As more children and young adults openly identify as transgender, the urgency to create safe and inclusive school environments becomes paramount.

The landscape of gender inclusion in schools is complicated, requiring a nuanced understanding of diverse identities and experiences. From hostile environments to the evolving definition of *transgender*, a review of the literature emphasizes the need for proactive measures to create safe and supportive educational spaces for all. Addressing the gaps in policy and legislation, fostering awareness among educators, and challenging societal norms are crucial steps toward ensuring no child or young adult faces marginalization based on their gender identity.

Theoretical Framework

Various aspects of trans studies, queer pedagogy, and transgender theory emphasize the need for a nuanced understanding of gender within educational and societal frameworks. Trans studies challenges traditional educational structures that frame transgender individuals as the problem. It focuses on trans epistemologies, disputing the binary view of gender and challenging the presumed link between sex and gender. Instead, it advocates for gender self-determination and embraces gender ambiguity. The aim is to critique and reshape educational practices rather than blaming transgender students (Mangin, 2022).

Queer pedagogy, as described by Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2019), is not merely about incorporating LGBTQ figures into the curriculum, but understanding the structures that enable and constrain their representation. It addresses issues such as cissexism, transphobia, and homophobia, predicated on the belief male and female are rigid categories, unique unto

themselves. The goal is to combat erasure and stereotypical representations of sexual and gender diversity. However, while queer studies are seen as a hospitable space for transgender work, there is a tendency to equate “queer” with “gay” or “lesbian.” Transgender phenomena are sometimes misunderstood through a lens that prioritizes sexual orientation, contributing to the containment of all gender-related issues within the transgender category. This risks reinforcing normative categories of personhood and has political implications (Stryker, 2004).

Trans studies emerged in the early nineties, marking a shift in the discourse around transness (Stryker & Chaudry, 2022). The legitimacy of the gender binary system, which assumes sexuality, gender identity and expression correspond directly with biological sex, came into question (McEntarfer & Iovannone, 2022). Trans studies emphasizes the importance of considering other measures of difference, such as race, class, or gender within queer studies, as opposed to focusing specifically on binary gender categories (Stryker, 2019).

Transgender theory is portrayed as more actively challenging heteronormative gender binaries and oppressive social structures than queer theory (Nagoshi et al., 2023). It views gender as a social construction and explores the nature of gender through the lived experiences of transgender individuals (Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2010). Using this lens allows for limitless notions of gender identity: from the binary male/female, to neither or both traditional gender roles, and everything in between. Instead of viewing gender-diverse individuals as afflicted with some sort of disorder, the theory suggests varied gender identities can empower individuals by creating narratives beyond the traditional gender norms, leading to positive experiences through diversity (Leonard, 2022).

The body of literature underscores the evolution of trans studies, the importance of questioning normative structures within queer studies, and the potential of transgender theory to

inform social activism and challenge systems of oppression. It highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of gender, sexuality, and identity within educational and societal contexts.

Gender Identity

Gender Identity Development

Gender, a fundamental facet of internal identity, is traditionally perceived within a binary framework corresponding to conventional categories of man/boy or woman/girl, mirroring the concept of biological sex. Cisgender individuals, whose gender aligns with their assigned birth sex, contrast with transgender individuals who grapple with incongruence between their gender and sex (Mangin, 2020). Within the transgender community, a diverse spectrum exists, challenging binary norms. Some conform to societal gender expectations aligned with the “opposite” sex, while nonbinary transgender individuals defy these categories, adopting labels like gender fluid or genderqueer. There are an estimated 150,000 binary transgender students aged 13 to 17 in the United States, and an additional 375,000 youth identifying as nonbinary, genderqueer, or gender non-conforming (Mangin, 2020).

Developmental psychologists posit the foundational core of children’s gender identity solidifies by age 2 or 3, applicable to both transgender and cisgender children, and evolving throughout young adulthood (Mangin, 2020). Notably, transgender youth frequently disclose their diverse gender identities at an earlier age than their cisgender counterparts, reflecting a robust sense of self-awareness (Evans & Rawlings, 2021).

Youth assert their identities by employing various means of expression. This may be done verbally or behaviorally by indicating a preference for dressing in gender-normed clothing, expressing a desire for the sex characteristics of their identified gender or strongly disliking their own sexual anatomy, preferring to play with peers of the gender with which they identify (Stark

& Crofts, 2019). In comparison to cisgender children who often explore gender identity and expression, transgender children “consistently, insistently, and persistently describe their gender identity as that which does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth” (Stark & Crofts, 2019, p. 20).

A prevailing narrative among transgender students centers on a ‘being narrative,’ prioritizing gender identity over anatomical considerations. This approach signifies an understanding of their transgender identity as the authentic expression of an inner sense of self, rather than a transformation from one gender to another (McEntarfer & Iovannone, 2022).

Gender Expression

J. S. Smith and Smith (2017) reference the well-known trope, “all the world’s a stage,” and suggest gender is performed situationally and contextually. These performances are heavily influenced by societal definitions of what is “normal” with regard to specific gender characteristics. For transgender individuals, gender expression frequently goes beyond societal norms and binary confines, manifesting simultaneously in neither direction, or both; creating a complex, non-linear journey (Nagoshi et al., 2023).

We evaluate our gender performance based on feedback we receive through our interactions with others. If those around us perceive our gender identity differently than we do, there is cognitive dissonance and negative emotions are likely to occur, prompting us to make adjustments to correct the mismatch (J. S. Smith & Smith, 2017). Individuals transitioning to present their authentic selves require community support for autonomy. This is especially vital for transgender and gender non-conforming children as their agency and self-knowledge are often called into question due to their age (Stark & Crofts, 2019). However, developmental psychology research indicates socially-transitioned transgender children, with supported changes

in clothing, hairstyle, name, and pronouns, experience lower levels of depression and anxiety compared to those unable to socially transition, thus highlighting the importance of supporting these youth (Mangin, 2022).

Names and Pronouns

One of the simplest ways to provide gender-affirming support to transgender youth is consistently using their chosen names and pronouns. When a child's gender is affirmed through the use of their chosen name and pronouns, it is seen as an immediate sign of respect of their gender identities (Leonard, 2022) and often has a positive effect on sense of self (Mangin, 2022). Vance (2018) found "for each additional social context in which a transgender youth's chosen name was used, there was a significant decrease in depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behaviors" (p. 379).

Misgendering a transgender or gender non-conforming youth can be a significant source of distress (Vance, 2018). When students remain silent in moments of misgendering, it does not mean they are not hurt. Participants in McEntarfer and Iovannone's (2022) study noted feelings of anger and sadness, stating, "It's kinda like a punch in the gut. I immediately forgive people, but it still feels really bad" (p. 641). Eckes (2021) shares a similar perspective, arguing the use of students' chosen names and pronouns is affirming of their value and existence, while the mother of a transgender student states the denial of this causes active harm. McEntarfer and Iovannone (2022) note the importance of educators understanding this harm to help underscore the importance of using correct pronouns and names.

When a transgender person chooses a name, it is not simply to reflect their gender identity, but rather a process of finding a name they feel "embodies the essence of who they are" (Leonard, 2022, p. 49), their true name. Changing one's name and pronouns is a powerful self-

affirmation. Unfortunately, it can be difficult to legally change one's name and gender marker, often involving complex requirements and cost-prohibitive fees. Additionally, very few states have enacted legislation allowing for nonbinary gender markers on official identification documents, thus many youths are forced to choose a gender marker with which they do not identify (Vance, 2018).

Fortunately, policies and practices can be implemented to support the regular, appropriate use of chosen names and pronouns, even without a legal name or gender marker change. McEntarfer and Iovannone (2022) posit such policies not only provide crucial support, but also help transform schools into more gender-inclusive environments. Absent these policies, students may need to repeatedly disclose their transgender status, name, and pronouns to staff members and use identification cards with deadnames. Not only can this cause mental and emotional struggles for students, it can also out them to others, putting them at risk for harassment and violence (McEntarfer & Iovannone, 2022). Evans and Rawlings (2021) describe the relief felt by a student upon learning her name and pronouns would be shared with her new teachers, regardless of them not having been legally changed yet. She reported decreased anxiety over the possibility of having to hear and explain her deadname, and thus a greater capacity to focus on her education as she no longer had to worry about that aspect. While policies and practices regarding the use of chosen names and pronouns will not solve all problems, they set expectations and begin the work of dismantling cissexism (McEntarfer & Iovannone, 2022).

Gender in Schools

School Climate

Cisnormativity, the assumption all people are cisgender and their gender identity matches the legal sex category they were assigned at birth, pervades the educational system in the United

States (Mangin, 2022). This includes the implicit notion of cisgender being the norm and all other genders being different or abnormal (PFLAG, 2023). It is infused into school routines and traditions through record-keeping, facilities (e.g., bathrooms), and activities (e.g., sports) (Keenan, 2017). Yet this remains largely invisible to cisgender individuals who do not struggle navigating gendered spaces. In contrast, cisnormativity creates a harmful environment for transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) youth, where non-conforming gender expression is frequently met with intolerance (Mangin, 2022). These environments restrict all students' gender identity and expression by dictating the "correct" way to be a boy or a girl, and are particularly restrictive for TGNC students.

Not only do TGNC youth experience the restrictive implications of cisnormativity, they also rarely see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Evans and Rawlings (2021) confirm a distinct lack of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) topics across educational contexts. This is in contrast to other areas of diversity which are more frequently represented, such as religion or ethnicity. In the few instances LGBTQ topics are covered, they frequently are framed problematically, focusing on mental health struggles and victimization, thus perpetuating negative stereotypes (Evans & Rawlings, 2021).

When binary gender is perceived as the norm and rigidly upheld, individuals who do not conform to these norms may face prejudice, discrimination, and even abuse. Leonard (2022), Ullman (2017), and Wernick et al. (2014) all found TGNC youth to face significantly more discrimination and harassment than their cisgender and LGB peers. This may include overt physical and verbal harassment, intentional misgendering, and/or cyberbullying through social media (Mason et al., 2017). Participants reported these actions come not only from peers, but also from staff members and educational institutions in general (Leonard, 2022).

Schools that adhere strictly to gender binaries often struggle to respond adequately to the needs of gender-diverse students, addressing issues reactively. Discriminatory environments impact both the socioemotional well-being and academic performance of students, as emotional safety is crucial for effective learning (Luecke, 2018). Transgender students, in particular, experience lower feelings of closeness, acceptance, and belonging, along with less happiness and perceived fairness in school. Their perceptions of school connectedness and safety are notably more negative than those of cisgender students (Pampati et al., 2020).

These negative school experiences result in distressing consequences for TGNC youth. Victimization is linked to outcomes such as anxiety, depression, isolation, substance use, traumatic stress, and suicidal ideation (Craig et al., 2018). Adverse effects of this mistreatment are even more profound for youth with multiple marginalized identities, such as race, ethnicity, language, class (Mangin, 2020). McEntarfer and Iovannone (2022) describe instances of college students “switching majors, avoiding online classes, dropping classes, and arriving late to avoid roll call, all to avoid hostile environments and misgendering” (p. 635).

The hostility and discrimination faced by TGNC youth in schools creates a fearsome learning environment. J. S. Smith and Smith (2017) note this perception increases the more TGNC students are comfortable expressing their gender identity outside the societal norm. Russell et al. (2020) further state transgender youth find the overall school climate, as well as some physical aspects of the school environment, as less safe than their cisgender peers.

The research overwhelmingly indicates a majority of TGNC youth (65-75%) report feeling unsafe at school due to reasons related to their gender identity or expression (Allen et al., 2020; Day et al., 2018; Luecke, 2018; McGuire et al., 2010; Pampati et al., 2020), a rate significantly higher than that of their cisgender peers (Allen et al., 2020). As many as half of

TGNC students are required to use bathroom facilities that align with their biological sex (Abreu et al., 2020). A similar proportion report their chosen pronouns not being allowed in school (Allen et al., 2020). Thirty-nine percent of TGNC youth report being criticized for their gender expression by school staff (Luecke, 2018), and transphobic remarks from peers were identified by 85% of TGNC youth (Allen et al., 2020). While verbal harassment is the most common type of victimization experienced by TGNC youth, many instances of physical harassment (e.g., pushing, shoving; 50%), physical assault (e.g., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon; 25%), and sexual assault (10%) are also reported (Abreu et al., 2020; Keenan, 2017; Luecke, 2018; McGuire et al., 2010). Instances of such harassment are most frequently reported in unmonitored locations such as hallways or locker rooms (McGuire et al., 2010). Pampati et al. (2020) report many TGNC students distance themselves from school to cope with school violence. The greater their experiences of victimization, the more likely they are to miss school. This interaction effect applies to all students, but is even more pronounced for TGNC as compared to cisgender students (Pampati et al., 2020).

School Staff

“Faculty represent one of the most significant stakeholders when it comes to institutional and individual impact on students” (McEntarfer & Iovannone, 2022, p. 633). The attitudes of school faculty and staff toward transgender and gender non-conforming students directly impact students’ perceptions of safety and well-being at school. When teachers are uncomfortable with gender diversity, school experiences are marred by bullying, harassment, and microaggressions that have a cumulative effect of making schools unwelcoming environments for TGNC youth (Luecke, 2018). School staff contributes to TGNC students’ distress by using students’ given (birth gender) names instead of their chosen (identified gender) names (McGuire et al., 2010).

This lack of respect for students' identity, as well as instances of pronoun misgendering increase the likelihood of TGNC youth experiencing peer victimization in school (Evans & Rawlings, 2021). Additionally, teacher bias may inhibit appropriate responses to these behaviors. In fact, Craig et al. (2018) report many TGNC students who experience harassment at school do not report it, often believing nothing will be done to stop it, or reporting may even exacerbate the situation.

Fortunately, McEntarfer and Iovannone's (2022) statement above also holds true for school staff who are supportive of TGNC youth. Supportive teachers are linked to less harassment and bullying as well as decreased rates of school dropout of TGNC students (Abreu et al., 2020). Gender diverse students who report having teachers who are supportive of and positive about such diversity have reported higher academic self-concept and greater confidence and motivation to learn (Ullman, 2017). Additionally, when teachers support students by ensuring appropriate name and pronoun usage, TGNC youth are able to spend less time correcting people and return their attention back toward their studies (Evans & Rawlings, 2021).

Many educators feel ill-prepared to support TGNC students (Evans & Rawlings, 2021). Mangin (2022) attributes this to a lack of training relating to gender, both in pre-service and in-service education. Payne and Smith (2014) note LGBTQ topics are minimally present in educator preparation programs, receiving significantly less attention than other areas of diversity, and content often reinforces negative or stereotypical representations, including LGBTQ topics in sections on mental health or sexually transmitted disease. Educators in their study expressed a failure of university teacher preparation programs to address the gender binary, gender enculturation, gender identity, gender fluidity, or the needs of transgender students. This lack of

preparation led to experiencing fear and anxiety when encountering a transgender child or the disruption of the gender binary, making it difficult for them to provide affirming support.

Keenan (2017) acknowledges the need for ongoing training for educators to better prepare them to work with TGNC youth. He advocates for ongoing work in this area, noting single session trainings are not sufficient for this task. Leonard (2022) cites the importance of assisting teachers to develop confidence in challenging gendered harassment in schools. McGuire et al. (2010) suggest this can be done through sexual orientation and gender identity training for teachers and school personnel, noting with proper support, teachers can play an important role in improving school climate.

School leaders play a vital role in developing inclusive schools, supporting teachers, and positively influencing the school experiences of TGNC youth (Mangin, 2020). Mangin's (2020) study indicates "in the context of a supportive principal, both the school community and the transgender student can have positive experiences" (p. 257). Principals need to work to disrupt the binary thinking that creates unsafe school environments for transgender children. This, in combination with visible, identifiable supportive staff in schools contributes to an environment where TGNC young people feel more comfortable communicating their gender identity in the school setting and seeking out staff as a source of support (Allen et al., 2020).

Risk and Protective Factors

Transgender and gender non-conforming youth have significantly higher rates of engaging in risk behaviors and lower levels of protective factors than their cisgender peers (Eisenberg et al., 2019). Transgender youth are at high risk of substance abuse. Compared to their cisgender counterparts, TGNC youth are more than twice as likely to smoke cigarettes, use nonmedical prescription pain medication, and report episodes of heavy drinking (DePedro &

Gorse, 2023). There is a correlation between transgender students' gender identities not being accepted and elevated mental health problems including depression, anxiety, self-harm, and suicide (Eckes, 2021). DePedro and Gorse (2023) and Eisenberg et al. (2019) adopt a minority stress perspective to explain these elevated rates of substance use and increased mental health needs in TGNC youth. This framework posits TGNC students comprise a marginalized group, subject to ongoing social stressors (e.g., hate speech, discriminatory policies and practices, social stigma surrounding gender non-conformity). As a result, they may internalize these negative messages about their identities, which has a negative impact on mental health (Eisenberg et al., 2019), and turn to self-harm or substance use as a means of coping (DePedro & Gorse, 2023).

School and family factors both appear to significantly impact outcomes for TGNC youth. School-based victimization is a major risk factor for TGNC students, while school connectedness and supportive school staff serve as protective factors (DePedro & Gorse, 2023). Parodi et al. (2022) describe school connectedness as one's feeling a sense of belonging at school, and demonstrate its value as a protective factor for mental health. School connectedness for TGNC youth can be bolstered by the presence of an active Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA), particularly when gender identity is included as a central point of discussion (Parodi et al., 2022; Craig et al., 2018). Evans and Rawlings (2021) cite research indicating a four times greater likelihood of TGNC youth dropping out of school when they feel unsupported by their teachers, while Leonard (2022) states, "the presence of a trusted adult in school, and being able to talk to them about gender and sexuality has been associated with positive self-esteem for both LGB and transgender students, increased feelings of safety in school, greater academic achievement, and a more positive overall academic experience" (p. 50).

Family factors, particularly parental support, also strongly influence outcomes for TGNC youth. In general, LGBTQ adolescents report lower levels of family support (Eisenberg et al., 2019). Parental rejection of gender identity is a contributing factor to TGNC youth suicide attempts (Stark & Crofts, 2019). However, suicide risk for these youth decreases by a factor of 10 when families are supportive (Mayo, 2021). Stark and Crofts (2019) note when families accept a child's gender identity by using the appropriate name and pronouns and enabling gender expression as the child desires, rates of adverse mental health symptoms are comparable to cisgender youth.

Legislation and Policy

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 provide protection for transgender students (Mangin, 2020). However, gender identity and expression have not explicitly been named as protected classes in federal discrimination, hate crime, and bullying legislation (McQuillan, 2021). At the state level, a number of states have instituted legal mandates protecting students from discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. Unfortunately, a number of other states have passed anti-LGBTQ+ education laws at the same time (McQuillan, 2021). In recent years, Title IX-related protections for TGNC youth in public schools have come under fire from conservative advocacy groups claiming parental rights outweigh student rights (Mayo, 2021).

McQuillan's (2021) research suggests legislative mandates to protect LGBTQ+ students in public schools are a powerful motivator for school boards to implement policy protections for this population. She states many bullying policies lack protection from bullying based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression until legislation mandate stronger protections in this regard. Sexual orientation and gender identity/expression inclusive

nondiscrimination policies send a message that a school is a welcoming and affirming environment where harassment and discrimination of LGBTQ+ youth are not tolerated. These policies are associated with more supportive school environments for LGBTQ+ youth (Day et al., 2019). LGBTQ+ students in Day and colleagues' (2019) study were less likely to be truant, less frequently victimized, and had higher self-reported grades when these policies were present. Often, though, school policies focus mainly on issues surrounding sexual orientation and fail to adequately address the unique needs of TGNC youth (Day et al., 2019). Additionally, as Abreu et al. (2020) report, a majority of students report their schools continue to have discriminatory policies and practices relative to LGBTQ+ students. For instance, in some districts, educators are required to notify parents should a TGNC student confide their transgender status to a school staff member. These types of policies deny students potentially crucial sources of support and privacy. If students do not have gender identity support at home, school may be the only place they can find affirmation and policies such as this may prove detrimental (Mayo, 2021).

Mangin (2020) advocates for the development of appropriate policies which specifically address the needs of transgender and gender non-conforming students. She states "this includes matters related to privacy and disclosure, student records and information systems, use of names and pronouns, dress codes, sex-separated facilities and activities (e.g., bathrooms, locker rooms), as well as harassment and bullying" (p. 261). Luecke (2018) goes further and suggests policy include the unrestricted right to modify or transition gender expression. McQuillan (2021) notes policy must also include specific implementation tools and a plan for organizational engagement if such policies are to create meaningful change in historically-tolerated discriminatory behaviors.

Best Practices

Meyer et al. (2016) explains policies and practices designed to cultivate safe and inclusive spaces for marginalized students are often reactive, focusing on regulating and punishing individual behavior instead of challenging the institutional conditions which produce a system of binary gender normativity. Luecke (2018) suggests taking a child-centered, proactive approach instead. She refers to this as the Gender Facilitative Schools framework, designed to nurture gender identity skills and peer support. “In a Gender Facilitative School framework, faculty and staff learn to be direct and vocal in responding to student micro-aggressions to avoid communicating acceptance or tolerance for what transpired, with a focus on educating rather than punishing perpetrators so that they can understand why their words or actions were hurtful” (Luecke, 2018, p. 274). These schools make a conscious effort to evaluate gender-based activities, rules, policies, and practices, discontinuing those without a valid educational purpose (Luecke, 2018). Meyer et al. (2016) reflect on such practices, noting the more schools work to disrupt the social norms that create barriers for TGNC youth, the fewer individual accommodations will be necessary because barriers will be removed for all students, not only those who identify as TGNC.

Fenaughty (2019) posits behavior and attitudes are influenced by social norms. Thus, viewing norms as learned, and therefore unlearnable, means they can effectively be used to create or eliminate oppression, including cisheteronormativity. Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2019) call for ‘deconstructive revolts’ committed to questioning the limits of cisnormative frameworks. Mangin (2022) believes the first step in this endeavor is decreasing gendered classroom practices. She states this not only allows for the disruption of cisnormativity, but also creates more room for expansive gender expression and decreases the gender policing often seen

in schools. Similarly, Payne and Smith (2014) assert the creation of an affirming environment for TGNC students provides schools the opportunity to become critically aware of the ways in which their curricula and systems are dependent upon the gender binary, and how that dependence is harmful to any student who falls outside the normative definitions of “boy” or “girl.”

Incorporating sexuality and gender diversity in the curriculum is an important step toward creating an inclusive learning environment for TGNC youth (Evans & Rawlings, 2021). Yet, simply including representation is not enough. TGNC students need to see themselves in a range of texts depicting them as a normal, significant part of life, not as a separate or different category of person (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2019). Dinkins and Englert (2015) describe texts being used as windows and mirrors through which all students are able to explore themselves and the world. Texts can provide positive imagery contrary to negative or missing characterizations. Texts can be used as “windows” for students to explore the differences in others, while “mirrors” can be used to view reflections of themselves in the characters. The combination of these two concepts creates limitless possibilities for students to see beyond their own lived experiences (Dinkins & Englert, 2015). Utilizing diverse curricular resources thus serves to educate, promote acceptance, and increase supportiveness and perceptions of safety for all, not just TGNC, students (Evans & Rawlings, 2021).

Districts can support the efforts to create affirming, inclusive environments for TGNC youth by developing and implementing policies to that effect. These policies should explicitly provide protections based on gender identity and gender expression (DePedro & Gorse, 2023). Educational leaders must be fully aware of these policies and ensure staff and the entire school community are also aware, especially when any changes or new policies are implemented.

Additionally, it is vital to develop a process for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of these policies, including protocol for updating them (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017).

Adopting inclusive curricular materials and drawing up TGNC-supportive policies are but the first steps in creating an inclusive school environment for these youth. Educators are still in need of support themselves to implement these policies and engage in the day-to-day work of disrupting cisnormativity. Critically, it must also be noted the importance of this work, even (or especially!) when there are not known or identified transgender students. “In reality, less restrictive gender norms benefit all children and unless a child discloses their identity, it is impossible to tell whether children are transgender” (Mangin, 2020, p. 280).

Thus, educators must receive training around transgender-inclusive practices. They must learn how to support and affirm TGNC youth, especially when they experience victimization (DePedro & Gorse, 2023). A critical element in this training is to begin by differentiating between gender identity and sexuality (Rodela & Tobin, 2017). Unfortunately, the two concepts are often conflated, unnecessarily muddling the conversation. Educator training should also focus on helping foster supportive attitudes toward TGNC youth and encouraging students to intervene when they witness mistreatment (Wernick et al., 2014). Wernick et al. (2014) suggest including TGNC youth as leaders of these trainings to be most effective. Professional development should cultivate in-depth understandings of gender nondiscrimination policies, current developmental understandings of TGNC youth, and strategies for creating a positive climate (Luecke, 2018).

Finally, a vital component to educator training is support of and the subsequent requirement for educators to intervene when harassment occurs (McGuire et al., 2010). McGuire et al. (2010) find teacher intervention to stop harassment is associated with greater feelings of

safety for all students, not just those who are directly harassed. Participants in their study expressed a desire for teachers to intervene and stop harassment, yet noted they rarely experienced such support. Importantly, they also noted teachers sometimes engage in the harassment themselves. When a teacher harasses a student, it not only causes harm in and of itself, it also sends a message they will not support the student by stopping others from harassing them, and such harassment is acceptable. Thus, it is critical for schools to make every effort to eliminate harassment by staff and instead foster teacher intervention in harassment by both students and staff (McGuire et al., 2010).

Educators must engage in affirmative practices, exploring and validating positive expressions of LGBTQ+ identities and acknowledging the impact of structural oppression on these students' well-being (Craig et al., 2018). To support this, educational decisions should be guided by the needs of students as they relate to their well-being. Mangin (2020) suggests adopting a child-centered approach can help alleviate fears about student safety and district liability by assuming a proactive stance based on individuals treating each other with respect, love, and kindness. Mayo (2021) acknowledges some school personnel may hold personal beliefs or religious convictions relating to transgender issues, but that does not exempt them from their professional responsibility to ensure all students are respected in school. Effective educational leaders educate not only themselves regarding these needs, but their staff and the larger school community, as well. Mayo (2021) argues this extends to the school's obligation to assist parents in understanding gender diversity and advocating for parents to also treat TGNC youth with respect.

Mangin (2022) describes three broad strategies to effectively support TGNC students: decreasing gendered practices, increasing discussion about gender, and affirming gender identity

and expression. Gendered practices can be decreased by employing gender-neutral strategies. Bartholomaeus and Riggs (2017) suggest making all options for dress codes (including as they relate to hair, make-up, and jewelry) available to all students, for all activities and events. They also recommend removal of other gendered language and practices. Choral parts can be referred to by their names or range (e.g., bass, soprano range). Staff can refrain from dividing students by gender for lining up, class activities, seating, and referring to them as “boys and girls.” School forms should be gender inclusive, including open-ended responses for gender (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). Mangin (2022) states, “making space for gender complexity in elementary classrooms facilitates the kind of ‘unscripting’ that allows children to construct new knowledge about gender” (p. 330). Increasing discussions about gender is accomplished by actively engaging with diverse curricular materials. Lessons specifically related to gender can be taught, but more commonly implemented is exposing students to literature exhibiting normalized, valued transgender and gender-expansive characters (Mangin, 2022). The most basic step to affirming gender identity and expression is referring to students by their chosen names and pronouns, without requiring official documentation (Mangin, 2022). Identification cards, library cards, yearbook photos and the like should reflect affirmed names of students and staff members. Transphobic language and misgendering should be corrected when observed (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). In addition to using affirmative language, a supportive space can be created allowing students to socially transition or share their transition story with others (Mangin, 2022). Importantly, these practices should be implemented regardless of whether or not there is an identified transgender student in the school or classroom, as all students benefit from opportunities to learn about gender and to challenge harmful gender stereotypes that can negatively affect both cisgender and TGNC youth (Mangin, 2022).

Consistently implementing affirmative practices is important to the well-being of TGNC youth (Bowskill, 2017). Mission statements should celebrate diversity, including gender diversity. Protocols for recording and addressing incidents of harassment and victimization should be clearly delineated (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). As Keenan (2017) states, “we need pedagogies that concentrate more of our efforts on inviting people to be with each other in our full humanity . . . that deeply examine how our current gender system confines us all and how that interacts with other systems, like race, class, and ability” (p. 553). When we implement these types of frameworks in elementary school, it serves as a preventative measure in creating safer educational environments for students in later years (Allen et al., 2020).

Summary and Conclusions

The research clearly demonstrates the myriad difficulties faced by TGNC youth in schools. The educational environment is not currently designed to include those who do not fit within the confines of a socially-constructed binary gender system. Trans-supportive policy is necessary to combat this culture of cisnormativity in schools. This research attempts to ascertain factors influencing the adoption and implementation of such policies, as a prerequisite to improving outcomes for TGNC youth.

Based on the findings of the research, there are many recommendations for supportive educational practices that may result in more positive outcomes for transgender and gender diverse students. Allen et al. (2020) state schools should implement programming to create more TGNC-inclusive schools. They mention Welcoming Schools (Welcoming Schools, n.d.) as one such program. Welcoming Schools is a comprehensive bias-based bullying prevention program which provides resources and tools to help create LGBTQ+ and gender-inclusive schools (Welcoming Schools, n.d.). The authors also point to the importance of schools explicitly

including gender identity and expression in the language of their anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies. Cultural competency and unconscious bias training should include understanding all gender identities, as well as addressing the intersectional effects felt by TGNC youth who also fall into other minority categories such as ability, class, race (Mangin, 2022). School staff (teachers, school counselors, administrators, support staff) who support the unique needs of TGNC students should not only be available but should also be both visible and easily identifiable to encourage these students to seek them out as a source of support (Allen et al., 2020). All staff members should make a concerted effort to intervene when gender-based bullying or harassment occurs (McGuire et al., 2010).

Mangin (2020) demonstrates educational leaders can play a pivotal role in affecting positive change regarding the cisnormative assumptions that persist in schools. However, she acknowledges shifting the school culture to one more gender-inclusive is a daunting task. At the elementary level, it must be understood even young transgender children know their gender identity. This concept is often questioned, while the same does not hold true for cisgender children (Mangin, 2020). Teachers may want to be supportive yet struggle to implement new classroom practices contrary to deeply entrenched habits. Absent an easily identifiable TGNC student, or when known TGNC students conform to binary gender norms, teachers may not see the need to change their classroom practices. However, this presumes teachers are always aware of transgender or gender non-conforming students in their classrooms and ignores the fact all students can benefit from learning about inclusivity and challenging gender stereotypes (Mangin, 2022). Evans and Rawlings (2021) state, “transgender and gender diverse students who do not feel supported by teachers within their school are over four times more likely to leave school if they experience discrimination than those with teacher support” (p. 1496). It is therefore

essential educational leaders strive to ensure these necessary changes are implemented. Providing training such as that offered by Welcoming Schools (n.d.) can assist teachers in providing support and creating safe educational spaces for TGNC youth. Resisting presumptions of heterosexuality and cisnormativity, along with respecting students' rights to use chosen names and pronouns at school affirms and empowers these students, leading to more positive outcomes (Evans & Rawlings, 2021).

Implications for Practice

According to Leonard (2022), using gender-inclusive language and students' chosen names and pronouns is a vital step toward creating a gender-inclusive school environment supportive of TGNC students. In fact, he says it is “one of the most significant positive actions a school can take” (p. 50). He describes feelings of affirmation and received respect when staff members address students by the terms that embody who they truly are. The participants in Russell and colleagues' (2020) study reported more positive educational outcomes when teachers used TGNC students' correct names and pronouns as compared to those whose did not. Evans and Rawlings suggest students should be encouraged to correct any misgendering they hear, thus allowing students and staff to share the responsibility of creating an inclusive, respectful environment.

Mangin (2022) and Evans and Rawlings (2021) outline additional school-based suggestions for improving outcomes for TGNC youth. Mangin advocates for teachers using gender-neutral classroom management strategies such as eliminating “boy” and “girl” bathroom passes in favor of a generic bathroom pass all students can use, regardless of gender. She also extols the benefits of facilitating gender-expansive play, encouraging all-gender student interactions, and eliminating gender-specific activities within the classroom.

Evans and Rawlings (2021) stress the importance of the curriculum reflecting gender-inclusivity. They draw attention to the fact other areas of diversity (e.g., religion, ethnicity) receive far more attention in the curriculum than LGBTQ+ topics. Furthermore, when LGBTQ+ topics are present, they are often framed in a way that perpetuates negative, stereotypical representations of this population. They state providing more diversity of curricular resources with regard to LGBTQ+ topics educates all students about gender diversity and promotes acceptance and support from cisgender peers. Perhaps their most fervent assertion is the importance of including this type of diversity in the curriculum to work toward the goal of challenging the presumptions of heterosexuality and cisnormativity so prevalent in schools.

Craig et al. (2018) concur with the assertion everything possible must be done to create affirming spaces for TGNC youth. They note small pockets of safety are not sufficient to sustain these students' well-being, but instead what is required is full inclusivity and acceptance. Mangin (2020) explains this is best accomplished by acknowledging the distribution of human and civil rights is not a zero-sum matter. These rights can be extended to one group of individuals without compromising the rights of another group. Instead of educational leaders asking the question, "How can I help this student?" regarding an identified TGNC student, they should ask how they can create a school climate supportive of all transgender and gender non-conforming children, including those whose identity within that group is as yet unknown. Doing so begins the necessary work of dismantling the culture of cisnormativity (Mangin, 2020).

Gaps in the Research

Due to the greater amount of supports available for LGBTQ+ people in larger metropolitan areas, the bulk of the research thus far has been conducted in these settings. Data indicates LGBTQ+ individuals in nonmetropolitan and rural areas may experience greater

hostility and fewer supports. Additionally, studies often include only adult participants who may not accurately recall the details of their school experiences nor be able to generalize to the youth of today (Eisenberg et al., 2019).

Pampati et al. (2020) and DePedro and Gorse (2023) both note concern at the scarcity of literature exploring the intersectional effects of racial/ethnic minority status of TGNC youth. These students who are members of more than one marginalized group may be at even greater risk for the negative outcomes described earlier in this review. Further research is necessary to examine the intersectionality of ethnic, racial, or other minority status in conjunction with transgender status. In particular need of attention are studies examining familial supports, life stressors, and perception of educational environments of these multiply marginalized youth (Pampati et al., 2020).

Finally, as noted at the outset of this literature review, past studies have typically considered LGBTQ+ youth as a single group. Additionally, studies considering this group as a whole typically concentrate more on issues surrounding sexual orientation, not gender identity or expression (Wernick et al., 2014). The conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity is common, and yet it is clear the two are not one and the same. Social attitudes toward TGNC as compared to LGB youth may differ, as do the needs of the two distinct groups (Eisenberg et al., 2019). Studies that combine LGB and TGNC youth into one group are therefore limited in their generalizability to either group individually (DePedro & Gorse, 2023).

Suggestions for Future Research

As the research clearly identifies TGNC youth having negative school experiences, and demonstrates increasing supports and educator training may improve these experiences, the need for increased education research is essential (Mangin, 2020). It is important to explore all factors

influencing outcomes for these students. Schools should consider how they can help unsupportive parents to better understand gender diversity (Mayo, 2021). Research is needed to discern how schools can best support students who do not have supportive parents, and to help supportive parents advocate for their children. We need to continue to build upon our knowledge base of the gender spectrum, acknowledging students who fall outside the binary challenge the norms more and may require more significant changes to school practices. Future research should include an examination of how to support students across the entire gender spectrum (Mangin, 2020).

Educators require significantly more training and support to effectively create a TGNC-affirmative school culture. A mindset shift is necessary, requiring educators to think about gender in new ways and willingly act to disrupt cisnormativity (Mangin, 2022). With further research, training, and educator willingness to affect change, it is possible to create a safe and inclusive environment in which transgender and gender non-conforming students may have a more positive school experience and overall outcomes.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

This research study utilized an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach to gather information regarding the implementation of policies supportive of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) students in K-12 public schools within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Mixed methods research integrates both quantitative and qualitative data to glean additional insight beyond that which could be provided by a singular modality of data collection alone. More specifically, explanatory sequential mixed methods designs involve the researcher first collecting quantitative data, and then building upon the resulting knowledge base by explaining constructs in more detail through qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Rationale for Choice of Methodology

The purpose of this study was to identify factors contributing to or detracting from the successful implementation of TGNC-supportive policies in schools. By obtaining quantitative results from a survey of public school administrators and then following up with purposefully selected individuals to explore these results in greater depth through qualitative data analysis, the researcher was able to identify factors influencing the implementation of TGNC-supportive school policies.

In the first, quantitative, phase of the study, survey questions focused on how various characteristics of schools and districts (e.g., demographics, administrator and staff beliefs and understandings regarding TGNC students, student affinity groups) served as predictors to the existence and successful implementation of TGNC-supportive policies. In the second and final, qualitative phase, semi-structured interview questions more thoroughly explored topics including, but not limited to, diversity of student body, school supports for marginalized

populations, awareness of TGNC youth in the school/district, TGNC-related opportunities for professional development, formal and informal policies and procedures, and communication and enforcement of TGNC policies.

To explore the issue of school policy adequately supporting TGNC youth, one must begin with determining the simple existence or non-existence of policy. Thus, quantitative data regarding the prevalence of these policies is integral to the research. Similarly, as community demographics and attitudes often influence policy development, considering those data in conjunction with the data regarding the presence or absence of specifically trans-inclusive policy provides insight into factors influencing this.

Where policies do exist, the extent to which they are implemented with fidelity has the most direct impact on outcomes for TGNC youth (McCabe & Anhalt, 2022). Thus, digging deeper through the use of qualitative methods offers a more nuanced perspective on how these policies operate within the real world, not just on paper. The complex interaction between staff attitudes, community values, administrator support, age/grade level, and other factors can more adequately be examined through qualitative analysis than through quantitative data analysis alone. Together, the data provide not only a snapshot of the prevalence of TGNC-supportive policy in K-12 public schools across Pennsylvania, but also a more thorough examination of how these policies are in fact implemented to the benefit or detriment of TGNC youth. Combining this data was done with the intention of discovering successes and pitfalls, knowledge of which can be used to enhance districts' and schools' ability to successfully implement these policies to improve outcomes for TGNC youth.

Recruitment of Participants

The criteria for inclusion in this study consisted of holding a valid PK-12 Administrator certification from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, being a current building-level administrator (principal or assistant principal) in a public school in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and having served in their current role for at least one full school year. This purposive sampling ensured all participants have a minimum of three years of service within the field of education, a prerequisite to obtaining an administrative certification in Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2024). Additionally, over 75% of these individuals have earned graduate-level degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). While district-level administrators and school boards of education are directly responsible for policy development, building-level administrators are tasked with the day-to-day implementation and enforcement within the school buildings. Thus, they are in a unique position to speak from the perspective of the reality of these policies as they relate directly to TGNC students. By including administrators from across the 500 public school districts in Pennsylvania, which includes the third most diverse district in the nation, the sample provided a representative group of school leaders who work in schools with students with a wide range of characteristics.

A selected-response survey was sent via a recruitment email (Appendix A) to building-level administrators from the 500 public school districts in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Names and email addresses of administrators were obtained from the Pennsylvania Department of Education's (2024a) Educational Names and Addresses (EdNA) database, as well as school district staff directories. Following this quantitative data collection phase, interview participants were recruited via their response to the final survey question, which asked whether they were

willing to participate in follow-up interviews to further discuss the research topic. Therefore, the interview sample is a subset of the original survey sample.

Collection of Data

Data were collected in two distinct phases: quantitative survey responses and qualitative semi-structured interviews. Initial participants received a link via school email address to a web-based survey hosted by SurveyMonkey (Appendix B). Survey questions were presented in categorical format (demographic, personal beliefs and understandings, school perspectives) and recorded anonymously. Demographic information collected included gender identity (optional response), age range, education level, administrative role, experience, and school characteristics. The remaining questions utilized a Likert scale to measure respondents' extent of agreement or disagreement with statements regarding gender identity, including questions about transgender students. A six-option scale was used with the intent to ascertain even the smallest of differences between respondents, as well as to avoid fully neutral responses.

The final question of the survey asked respondents if they were willing to participate in a follow-up interview. As the intent was to interview participants able to speak specifically to the implementation of TGNC-supportive policy, this question was prefaced with a brief summary of the scope and purpose of the research in hopes of recruiting a population comfortable and able to speak in depth on TGNC students and policy in their school.

A semi-structured interview design (Appendix D) was selected to ensure focus on the research topic, as well as allow flexibility in exploring the participants' personal experiences and insights. Interviews were conducted through Zoom, either in videoconference or telephone format, at the preference of the interviewee. Interviews were recorded with participants' consent,

and transcribed using voice-to-text software for ease of reference at later points for further analysis and accuracy checking.

Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed separately. Trends and themes were identified in the survey (quantitative) data using descriptive and correlational statistics methods and then used to guide the of the semi-structured (qualitative) interview. While the interview protocol was developed ahead of time due to IRB requirements, it did allow some flexibility as the conversations progressed through the interview. The qualitative data thus built directly upon the quantitative results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Interview responses were examined to garner a general idea of participants' experiences and insights. Notes were made summarizing individual interviews and used for member-checking to ensure the participant's responses were accurately understood by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data was then grouped by theme individually for each respondent, and further interviews were conducted until saturation was achieved, additional data no longer revealing new properties nor sparking new insights. Categories were then developed collectively for the entire sample, leading toward the identification of the major findings of the research.

Ethical Protections

Prior to beginning data collection through the initial survey, all appropriate documentation was presented to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Antioch University to obtain the necessary permissions. Informed consent information for quantitative data collection was included at the start of the online survey. Respondents indicating willingness to participate in a qualitative interview were contacted individually and provided a more thorough explanation of the research, as well as an informed consent document relating specifically to the semi-

structured interview (Appendix C). Electronic signatures were collected to indicate participants' consent prior to engaging in the qualitative data collection. At no time were potential participants unduly pressured to sign consent forms, and participants were able during both the online survey and the semi-structured interview to decline answering any questions as well as withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. This created an environment in which participants were comfortable sharing their personal experiences and perspectives as they relate to TGNC students. No compensation was offered to participants for any portion of the research.

Interviews were held and recorded with participants' consent via Zoom. All participants selected video as opposed to teleconferencing modality for their semi-structured interview. The researcher participated from a private space within their home or office, with the door closed and a headset used to prevent the interview being overheard by anyone present elsewhere in the building during the interview.

Survey data is housed online via the secure SurveyMonkey platform, in a password-protected account owned by the researcher. All other electronic records are maintained as password-protected files on the researcher's personal computer, which also requires a password to access. All hard-copy notes and memos are kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office. All data will be maintained for five years and then destroyed.

Only the researcher had access to the specific identities of interviewees. Names were changed using a random name generator and pseudonyms used in all transcripts generated from the data. The same was done regarding any school names and specific locations disclosed by participants. Research documents only describe location as urban/rural/suburban in Pennsylvania, with no further geographic indicators by which a school or district may be identified.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher has more than twenty years experience as an educator, having worked as a paraprofessional, behavior technician, high school teacher, middle school and high school counselor in Pennsylvania, in addition to being certified in PK-12 Administration and Supervisor of Pupil Services, as well as holding a Pennsylvania Department of Education recognized endorsement in Social-Emotional Learning. Throughout their career, the researcher has observed the struggles of students in marginalized groups. This has increasingly been the case in recent years in their observations of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) students. They have also recognized the distinct lack of policy created explicitly to support these students, while at the same time noting administrators are held accountable for creating climates safe and conducive to learning for all students equitably. TGNC youth are at increased risk of negative school and mental health outcomes, yet trans-specific policy is lacking (Martino, 2022). Thus, the researcher sought to determine what factors influence the creation and successful implementation of these policies.

The researcher was committed to ensuring their research did not cause further damage to the TGNC community. Concerted efforts were made to ensure the methodology was deeply reflective as well as transparent with regard to how the researcher may have influenced the study. The researcher worked to collect, analyze, and interpret both quantitative and qualitative data as neutrally as possible to remove potential bias. The researcher focused on remaining nonjudgemental, neutral, accurate, and honest in all data analysis and reporting. This was accomplished through reflective journaling, conscious examination of the researcher's own thoughts, opinions, and beliefs, utilizing a semi-structured interview format, and member checking.

The researcher established their role with potential participants by introducing themselves and the purpose of the research. The researcher intentionally excluded from the sample recruitment any individuals with whom they have personally worked. The researcher therefore had no prior knowledge of or interaction with any prospective respondents. While the researcher should still be considered an insider as a fellow educator in a public school district in Pennsylvania, they are an outsider to the specific institutions and administrators central to the research.

Timeline

Institutional Review Board approval was applied for and received in early July of 2024. Initial correspondence seeking participants was sent via email to school administrators shortly after IRB approval was confirmed. Informed consent information was included in the email recruiting participants, as well as a link to the survey hosted on SurveyMonkey. Upon consenting to participating in the quantitative survey, participants were given access to the remaining questions of the online survey. Participants were requested to complete the survey prior to September 30, 2024. Upon closing the survey response window, the researcher then proceeded to analyze the quantitative data and review the semi-structured interview protocol. Respondents indicating willingness to participate in the qualitative interviews were chosen to ensure representation from schools/districts exhibiting a wide range of demographic characteristics. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from mid-October through early November 2024. Each interview transcript was reviewed, researcher notes and interpretations compiled, and member checking completed within one week of the interview. Finally, qualitative interview data was analyzed, interpreted, and themes identified in late November 2024.

Chapter Summary

This chapter described the methodology used in the research study. An explanatory sequential mixed methods design was utilized where the initially collected quantitative data was further explained by the qualitative data. The goal of this method was to uncover factors contributing to or detracting from the successful implementation of TGNC-supportive policies in K-12 public schools. The data collected from building-level administrators across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania highlights their collective experience enacting trans-supportive policies. Informed consent was obtained from participants prior to engaging them in both the survey and semi-structured interview phases of the research process. No identifying information was used regarding the interview participants, to protect their identities as well as their individual schools and districts. Data continues to be maintained in a secure location accessible only to the researcher, and will be destroyed five years after completion of the study. The following chapter will examine the research data in further detail.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The explanatory sequential mixed methods approach “involves a two-phase project in which the researcher collects quantitative data in the first phase, analyzes the results, and then uses a qualitative phase to help explain the quantitative results” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 248). This chapter therefore presents the results of the data analyzed from the survey distributed in the first phase, followed by the interviews conducted in the second phase of the research study. The qualitative findings from the interviews are used to further explain the quantitative results from the survey.

The online survey was composed of 11 demographic questions and five flex matrix questions. The interviews conducted with individual respondents were composed of 20 open-ended questions covering personal perspectives and experiences, school climate and culture, and policy. The researcher developed both the interview and the survey instruments.

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to identify factors contributing to or detracting from the successful implementation of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC)-supportive policies in K-12 public schools across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Administrator perspectives were solicited regarding attitudes, opinions, impressions, and awareness of TGNC students, as well as school- and district-specific practices and policies surrounding these students. The research question guiding this study was: What factors influence the successful implementation of transgender-supportive policies in K-12 public school settings?

Quantitative Results

Sample

Of the 3,886 Pennsylvania public school administrators to whom an invitation to participate was successfully sent in July 2024, 135 responded (3.5%). In the first section of the

survey, demographic information was collected about the respondents, including gender identity, TGNC identification, age range, education level, administrator certification, administrative role, and years in current position. Table 4.1: *Respondent Demographic Information* reports participant demographic data.

Table 4.1

Respondent Demographic Information

Variables	Participant responses (<i>N</i> = 135)	
	Number	Percent
<i>Gender identity</i>		
Female	61	45.19%
Male	73	54.07%
Non-binary	0	0.00%
Other	0	0.00%
Prefer not to say	1	0.74%
<i>TGNC identification</i>		
Yes	0	0.00%
No	133	98.52%
Prefer not to answer	1	0.74%
Skipped	1	0.74%
<i>Age range</i>		
25–35	8	5.93%
36–45	62	45.93%
46–55	54	40%
56–60	9	6.67%
61–65	1	0.74%
66+	1	0.74%
<i>Education level</i>		
Bachelor's degree	1	0.74%
Master's degree	88	65.19%
Doctoral candidate	39	28.89%
Doctoral degree	7	5.19%

Variables	Participant responses (<i>N</i> = 135)	
	Number	Percent
<i>Pennsylvania PK-12 administrator certification</i>		
Yes	133	98.52%
No	1	0.74%
In progress	0	0.00%
Prefer not to answer	1	0.74%
<i>Administrative role</i>		
Elementary assistant principal	16	11.85%
Elementary principal	33	24.44%
Middle/Jr. high school assistant principal	9	6.67%
Middle/Jr. high school principal	13	9.63%
High school assistant principal	36	26.67%
High school principal	19	14.07%
Other	9	6.67%
<i>Years in current position</i>		
Less than 1 year	17	12.59%
At least 1 year but less than 3 years	36	26.67%
At least 3 years but less than 5 years	27	20.00%
At least 5 years but less than 10 years	29	21.48%
10 years or more	26	19.26%

Twenty-one responses were ultimately excluded from the final data set, either due to the respondent holding their current position for less than one year, lacking a Pennsylvania PK-12 Administrator certification, and/or holding a position other than building-level administrator, all of which were inclusion criteria for the study. The final data set therefore included 114 responses, comprising 3% of the potential respondents providing valid, usable response data.

Table 4.2: *Included School/District Information* reports information regarding the characteristics of the schools/districts represented in the final data set.

Table 4.2*Included School/District Information*

Variables	Participant responses (<i>N</i> = 114)	
	Number	Percent
<i>Geographic region</i>		
Southeastern or Philadelphia	26	22.81%
Northeastern	20	17.54%
South Central	20	17.54%
Central	7	6.14%
Southwestern or Pittsburgh	27	23.68%
Northwestern	14	12.28%
<i>Type of school location</i>		
Urban	32	28.07%
Suburban	51	44.74%
Rural	31	27.19%
<i>Socioeconomic status of district</i>		
High	10	8.77%
Medium-high	13	11.4%
Medium	25	21.93%
Medium-low	26	22.81%
Low	26	22.81%
Extremely low	14	12.28%
<i>Diversity of school population</i>		
Extremely homogeneous (minimal diversity)	30	26.32%
Moderately homogeneous	22	19.30%
Moderately diverse	41	35.96%
Extremely diverse	21	18.42%

Data

School and district-specific data collected in the quantitative phase of this research included measures of administrators' personal beliefs and understandings regarding TGNC individuals, and indicators and perceptions of school climate as it relates to the treatment and support of TGNC students within their schools and districts. These items were measured on a

six-point Likert scale and are reported in Table 4.3: *Likert Scale Data*. Note, N count does not equal 114 for all selections due to some respondents opting to skip one or more questions.

Table 4.3

Likert Scale Data

Survey question	Survey response (N / %)					
	Disagree completely	Disagree	Disagree somewhat	Agree somewhat	Agree	Agree completely
Gender identity is how someone sees their innermost self.	12 / 11.76%	6 / 6.86%	1 / 0.98%	17 / 16.67%	39 / 38.24%	26 / 25.49%
Gender identity may be different than sex assigned at birth.	12 / 11.76%	7 / 6.86%	1 / 0.98%	15 / 14.71%	34 / 33.33%	33 / 32.35%
Gender expression is how someone presents themselves externally.	5 / 4.90%	5 / 4.90%	4 / 3.92%	16 / 15.69%	42 / 41.18%	30 / 29.41%
Gender expression may not conform with socially defined characteristics of male/female.	3 / 2.94%	3 / 2.94%	3 / 2.94%	11 / 10.78%	47 / 46.08%	35 / 34.31%
People can transition to their internal sense of gender socially or medically.	10 / 9.90%	6 / 5.94%	4 / 3.96%	13 / 12.87%	41 / 40.59%	27 / 26.73%
Transgender individuals seek attention.	20 / 19.61%	31 / 30.39%	20 / 19.61%	20 / 19.61%	7 / 6.86%	4 / 3.92%
Transgender identity is a choice and is not fixed.	10 / 10.00%	27 / 27.00%	21 / 21.00%	19 / 19.00%	16 / 16.00%	7 / 7.00%
Gender identity can be fluid.	12 / 11.76%	12 / 11.76%	16 / 15.69%	21 / 20.59%	26 / 25.49%	15 / 14.71%

Survey question	Survey response (N / %)					
	Disagree completely	Disagree	Disagree somewhat	Agree somewhat	Agree	Agree completely
Transgender people can identify as straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual.	2 / 1.96%	3 / 2.94%	5 / 4.90%	13 / 12.75%	42 / 41.18%	37 / 36.27%
Bullying is a persistent problem in my school for all students.	13 / 13.98%	29 / 31.38%	16 / 17.20%	22 / 23.66%	10 / 10.75%	3 / 3.23%
TGNC students are bullied more frequently than their cisnormative peers.	14 / 15.225	23 / 25.00%	12 / 13.04%	23 / 25.00%	16 / 17.39%	4 / 4/35%
TGNC students are frequent victims of bullying and harassment.	12 / 12.90%	19 / 20.43%	14 / 15.05%	24 / 25.81%	20 / 21.51%	4 / 4.30%
I need additional support in how to deal with issues TGNC students face.	15 / 16.13%	18 / 19.35%	15 / 16.13%	22 / 23.66%	20 / 21.51%	3 / 3.23%
My staff would benefit from training to develop skills to support TGNC students.	11 / 11.83%	5 / 5.38%	12 / 12.90%	29 / 31.18%	27 / 29.03	9 / 9.68%

A test of normality was conducted to assess whether the data from Likert scale items (sub-items in questions 13 and 15) met the assumption of normal distribution. Given that Likert data is ordinal and inherently bounded, it is not typically expected to follow a normal distribution. Consequently, nonparametric statistical tests are generally more appropriate for analyzing such data. As the sample size was greater than one hundred, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov

test of normality was selected and conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), as opposed to the Shapiro–Wilk test, which is better suited to smaller data sets. The results indicated a p -value of less than 0.001 for all Likert items, suggesting the data does not follow a normal distribution, as the p -value threshold for determining normality is set at 0.05. This information is presented in Table 4.4: *Test of Normality*.

Table 4.4

Test of Normality

Statement	Kolmogorov–Smirnov ^a		
	Test statistic	Degrees of freedom	Significance p -value
Gender identity is how someone sees their innermost self.	0.288	102	<.001
Gender identity may be different than sex assigned at birth.	0.285	102	<.001
Gender expression is how someone presents themselves externally.	0.285	102	<.001
Gender expression may not conform with socially defined characteristics of male/female.	0.296	102	<.001
People can transition to their internal sense of gender socially or medically.	0.299	102	<.001
Transgender individuals seek attention.	0.218	102	<.001
Transgender identity is a choice and is not fixed.	0.185	102	<.001
Gender identity can be fluid.	0.183	102	<.001
Transgender people can identify as straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual.	0.270	102	<.001
Bullying is a persistent problem in my school for all students.	0.201	102	<.001
TGNC students are bullied more frequently than their cisnormative peers.	0.175	102	<.001
TGNC students are frequent victims of bullying and harassment.	0.177	102	<.001

Statement	Kolmogorov–Smirnov ^a		
	Test statistic	Degrees of freedom	Significance <i>p</i> -value
I need additional support in how to deal with issues TGNC students face.	0.193	102	<.001
My staff would benefit from training to develop skills to support TGNC students.	0.242	102	<.001

^aLilliefors significance correction

The six-point Likert scale is considered an interval scale. Therefore, the mean can be used to describe the participants' overall opinions regarding the statements presented. From 1 to 1.83 it means disagree completely; from 1.84 to 2.66 it means disagree; from 2.67 to 3.50 it means disagree somewhat; from 3.51 to 4.33 it means agree somewhat; from 4.34 to 5.17 it means agree; from 5.18 to 6 it means completely agree. As shown in Table 4.5: *Descriptive Statistics*, respondents agreed with the following statements: gender identity is how someone sees their innermost self; gender identity may be different than sex assigned at birth; gender expression is how someone presents themselves externally; gender expression may not conform with socially defined characteristics of male/female; people can transition to their internal sense of gender socially or medically; transgender people can identify as straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual. They agreed somewhat regarding the statement gender identity can be fluid, as well as acknowledging their staff would benefit from training to develop skills to support TGNC students. Finally, respondents disagreed somewhat with the statements transgender individuals seek attention; transgender identity is a choice and not fixed; bullying is a persistent problem in my school for all students; TGNC students are bullied more frequently than their cisnormative peers; TGNC students are frequent victims of bullying and harassment; and reporting they need additional support in how to deal with issues TGNC students face.

Table 4.5*Descriptive Statistics*

Statement	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Gender identity is how someone sees their innermost self.	116	1	6	4.3966	1.61987
Gender identity may be different than sex assigned at birth.	116	1	6	4.4828	1.66542
Gender expression is how someone presents themselves externally.	115	1	6	4.7739	1.28460
Gender expression may not conform with socially defined characteristics of male/female.	116	1	6	5.0086	1.10725
People can transition to their internal sense of gender socially or medically.	115	1	6	4.5217	1.51801
Transgender individuals seek attention.	116	1	6	2.7069	1.32545
Transgender identity is a choice and is not fixed.	114	1	6	3.2544	1.43787
Gender identity can be fluid.	116	1	6	3.8362	1.59316
Transgender people can identify as straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual.	116	1	6	4.9914	1.09937
Bullying is a persistent problem in my school for all students.	106	1	6	2.9717	1.34842
TGNC students are bullied more frequently than their cisnormative peers.	105	1	6	3.2571	1.47432
TGNC students are frequent victims of bullying and harassment.	106	1	6	3.3774	1.44389

Statement	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
I need additional support in how to deal with issues TGNC students face.	106	1	6	3.3679	1.45619
My staff would benefit from training to develop skills to support TGNC students.	106	1	6	3.9623	1.39335

Note. 6 = agree completely, 5 = agree, 4 = agree somewhat, 3 = disagree somewhat, 2 = disagree, 1 = disagree completely

Indicators of a supportive school climate included the presence of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives; policies specifically supportive of TGNC students; a functioning Gender/Sexuality Alliance; among additional similar items. Insights were reported surrounding perceived school experiences of TGNC students in the respondents' schools, staff knowledge and ability to support TGNC students, and observations of mistreatment of TGNC students by other students or faculty/staff.

To statistically assess these relationships, the chi-square test of association (also known as the chi-square test of independence) was applied. This test evaluates whether there is a statistically significant difference between the observed and expected frequencies of responses, determining whether two categorical variables are independent of each other. A *p*-value of less than 0.05 will indicate a statistically significant association, guiding further interpretation of the results. Tables 4.6 through 4.9: *Chi-Square Tests* present the results of the chi-square tests of association. Additionally, crosstabulation analyses were conducted to visually explore the relationships between sub-items from questions 14, 16, and 17 and key demographic variables, including geographic region, rural/urban/suburban classification, socioeconomic status (SES), and diversity, as reported in questions 8–11. This approach provides an intuitive display of the distribution of responses across demographic categories.

Table 4.6*Chi-Square Test, Region*

Survey question (Yes/No/Unsure)		Pearson chi-square		
		Value	df	p
Indicate whether your school/district has the following (Y/N/Unsure)	An explicit position statement regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)	28.887	10	.001
	An operational DEI committee	29.664	10	<.001
	Written bullying policies and procedures	3.311	5	.652
	Written bullying policies and procedures specific to TGNC students	13.807	10	.182
	Specific training regarding bullying prevention	12.752	10	.238
	Specific procedures when dealing with TGNC students' bullying issues	15.338	10	.120
	A GSA	30.232	10	<.001
	Specific policy and practice related to supporting TGNC students	10.114	10	.431
Indicate whether you have observed the following against TGNC students by students.	Made fun of, called names, or insulted	7.957	10	.633
	Rumors spread about	14.030	10	.172
	Pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on	17.118	10	.072
	Threatened with harm	27.390	10	.002
	Forced or tried to be forced into doing something they did not want to do	10.564	10	.392
	Personal property destroyed on purpose	27.072	10	.003
	Intentionally left out or not allowed to join activities	11.795	10	.299
	Cell phones or internet used to say or post harmful things about	9.213	10	.512

Survey question (Yes/No/Unsure)		Pearson chi-square		
		Value	df	p
Indicate whether you have observed the following against TGNC students by teachers and/or other faculty & staff.	Made fun of, called names, or insulted	11.550	10	.316
	Rumors spread about	6.036	10	.812
	Pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on	3.271	5	.658
	Threatened with harm	3.271	5	.658
	Forced or tried to be forced into doing something they did not want to do	10.327	10	.412
	Personal property destroyed on purpose	5.882	5	.318
	Intentionally left out or not allowed to join activities	3.605	5	.608
	Cell phones or internet used to say or post harmful things about	8.390	10	.591

Table 4.7*Chi-Square Test, Area*

Survey question (Yes/No/Unsure)		Pearson chi-square		
		Value	df	p
Indicate whether your school/district has the following (Y/N/Unsure)	An explicit position statement regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)	11.689	4	.020
	An operational DEI committee	19.715	4	<.001
	Written bullying policies and procedures	1.289	2	.525
	Written bullying policies and procedures specific to TGNC students	3.883	4	.422
	Specific training regarding bullying prevention	3.655	4	.455
	Specific procedures when dealing with TGNC students' bullying issues	4.665	4	.323
	A GSA	15.852	4	.003
	Specific policy and practice related to supporting TGNC students	1.971	4	.741

Survey question (Yes/No/Unsure)		Pearson chi-square		
		Value	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Indicate whether you have observed the following against TGNC students by students.	Made fun of, called names, or insulted	4.668	4	.323
	Rumors spread about	2.945	4	.567
	Pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on	1.393	4	.845
	Threatened with harm	2.459	4	.652
	Forced or tried to be forced into doing something they did not want to do	5.715	4	.221
	Personal property destroyed on purpose	9.090	4	.059
	Intentionally left out or not allowed to join activities	6.84	4	.144
	Cell phones or internet used to say or post harmful things about	4.116	4	.390
Indicate whether you have observed the following against TGNC students by teachers and/or other faculty & staff.	Made fun of, called names, or insulted	3.741	4	.442
	Rumors spread about	4.422	4	.352
	Pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on	1.267	2	.531
	Threatened with harm	1.267	2	.531
	Forced or tried to be forced into doing something they did not want to do	5.322	4	.256
	Personal property destroyed on purpose	1.219	2	.544
	Intentionally left out or not allowed to join activities	1.285	2	.526
	Cell phones or internet used to say or post harmful things about	7.076	4	.132

Table 4.8*Chi-Square Test, Socio-Economic Status*

Survey question (Yes/No/Unsure)		Pearson chi-square		
		Value	df	p
Indicate whether your school/district has the following (Y/N/Unsure)	An explicit position statement regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)	20.213	10	.027
	An operational DEI committee	22.589	10	.012
	Written bullying policies and procedures	3.145	5	.678
	Written bullying policies and procedures specific to TGNC students	15.178	10	.126
	Specific training regarding bullying prevention	19.422	10	.035
	Specific procedures when dealing with TGNC students' bullying issues	18.707	10	.044
	A GSA	6.446	10	.777
	Specific policy and practice related to supporting TGNC students	17.613	10	.062
Indicate whether you have observed the following against TGNC students by students.	Made fun of, called names, or insulted	12.919	10	.228
	Rumors spread about	8.884	10	.543
	Pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on	8.798	10	.551
	Threatened with harm	16.627	10	.083
	Forced or tried to be forced into doing something they did not want to do	11.644	10	.310
	Personal property destroyed on purpose	11.350	10	.331
	Intentionally left out or not allowed to join activities	8.960	10	.536
	Cell phones or internet used to say or post harmful things about	10.529	10	.395

Survey question (Yes/No/Unsure)		Pearson chi-square		
		Value	df	p
Indicate whether you have observed the following against TGNC students by teachers and/or other faculty & staff.	Made fun of, called names, or insulted	13.968	10	.174
	Rumors spread about	10.827	10	.371
	Pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on	2.954	5	.707
	Threatened with harm	2.954	5	.707
	Forced or tried to be forced into doing something they did not want to do	12.527	10	.251
	Personal property destroyed on purpose	5.201	5	.392
	Intentionally left out or not allowed to join activities	1.748	5	.883
	Cell phones or internet used to say or post harmful things about	7.024	10	.723

Table 4.9*Chi-Square Test, Diversity*

Survey question (Yes/No/Unsure)		Pearson chi-square		
		Value	df	p
Indicate whether your school/district has the following (Y/N/Unsure)	An explicit position statement regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)	23.541	6	<.001
	An operational DEI committee	15.925	6	.014
	Written bullying policies and procedures	2.475	3	.480
	Written bullying policies and procedures specific to TGNC students	9.188	6	.163
	Specific training regarding bullying prevention	5.094	6	.532
	Specific procedures when dealing with TGNC students' bullying issues	8.441	6	.208
	A GSA	12.986	6	.043
	Specific policy and practice related to supporting TGNC students	6.400	6	.380

Survey question (Yes/No/Unsure)		Pearson chi-square		
		Value	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Indicate whether you have observed the following against TGNC students by students.	Made fun of, called names, or insulted	8.355	6	.213
	Rumors spread about	2.948	6	.815
	Pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on	4.200	6	.650
	Threatened with harm	3.364	6	.762
	Forced or tried to be forced into doing something they did not want to do	3.070	6	.800
	Personal property destroyed on purpose	1.992	6	.920
	Intentionally left out or not allowed to join activities	9.170	6	.164
	Cell phones or internet used to say or post harmful things about	3.006	6	.808
Indicate whether you have observed the following against TGNC students by teachers and/or other faculty & staff.	Made fun of, called names, or insulted	6.513	6	.368
	Rumors spread about	4.066	6	.668
	Pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on	2.557	3	.465
	Threatened with harm	2.557	3	.465
	Forced or tried to be forced into doing something they did not want to do	8.344	6	.214
	Personal property destroyed on purpose	2.059	3	.560
	Intentionally left out or not allowed to join activities	1.332	3	.722
	Cell phones or internet used to say or post harmful things about	2.809	6	.832

Significant relationships were initially found between all reported demographic categories (region within the Commonwealth, geographic area classification, socio-economic status of the district, diversity of the district) and the presence of an explicit position statement regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), as well as an operational DEI committee. The presence of a Gay-Straight or Gender-Sexuality Alliance (GSA) was significantly correlated with

region, area, and diversity. Significant relationships were found between region and students threatening to harm TGNC students as well as destroying their personal property. These were the only significant relationships regarding mistreatment or harassment of TGNC students. Socio-economic status was significantly related to schools having specific training regarding bullying prevention and specific procedures outlined for when dealing with TGNC students' bullying needs.

Further analysis of the data narrowed the field of significant relationships due to expected minimum values being too low for the data to be considered valid in all cases. This led to relationships being found only with the demographic categories of geographic area classification and diversity of the district and the survey items relating to DEI and GSA. A crosstabulation analysis graph for each of the final set of significantly related items is presented in Figures 4.1 through 4.6.

Figure 4.1

Area x Explicit Position Statement Regarding DEI

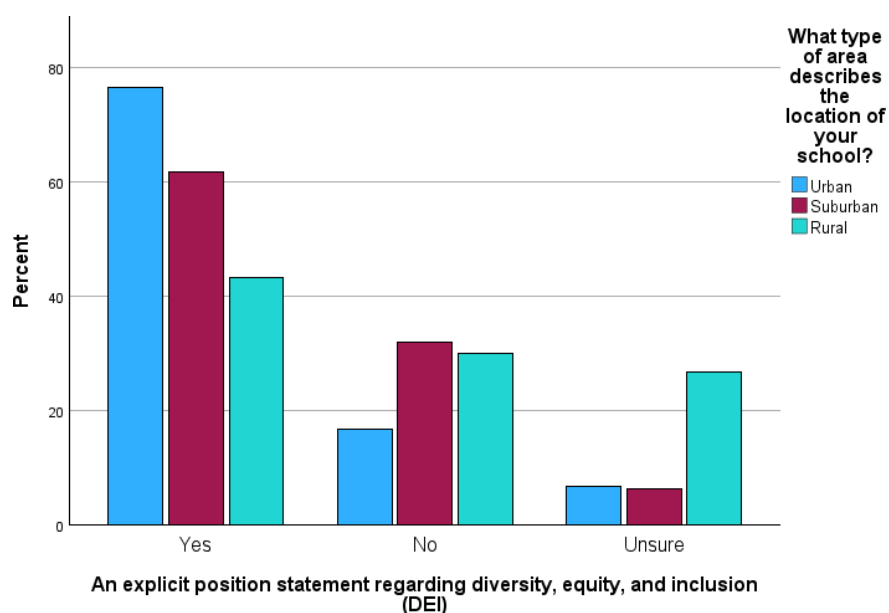


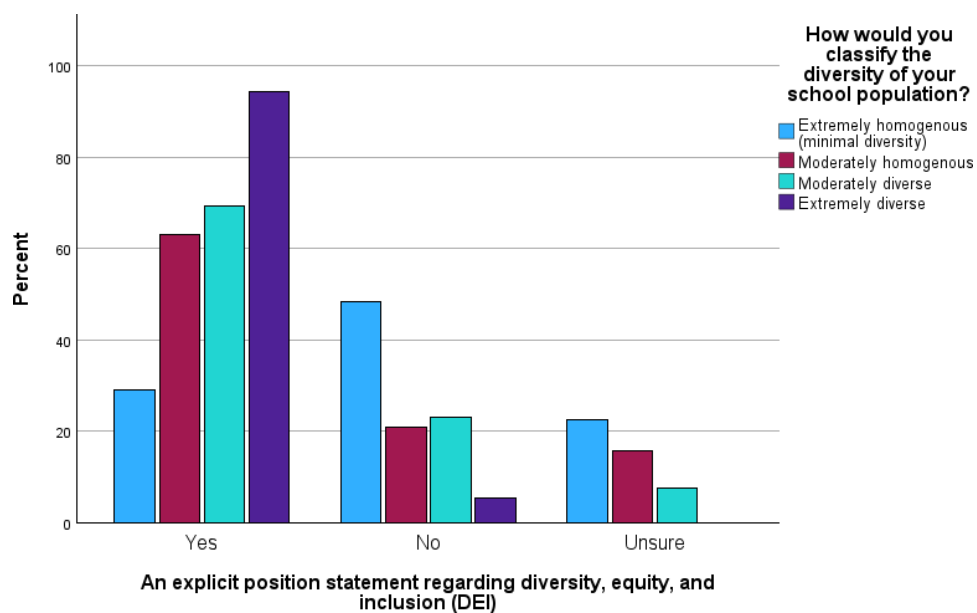
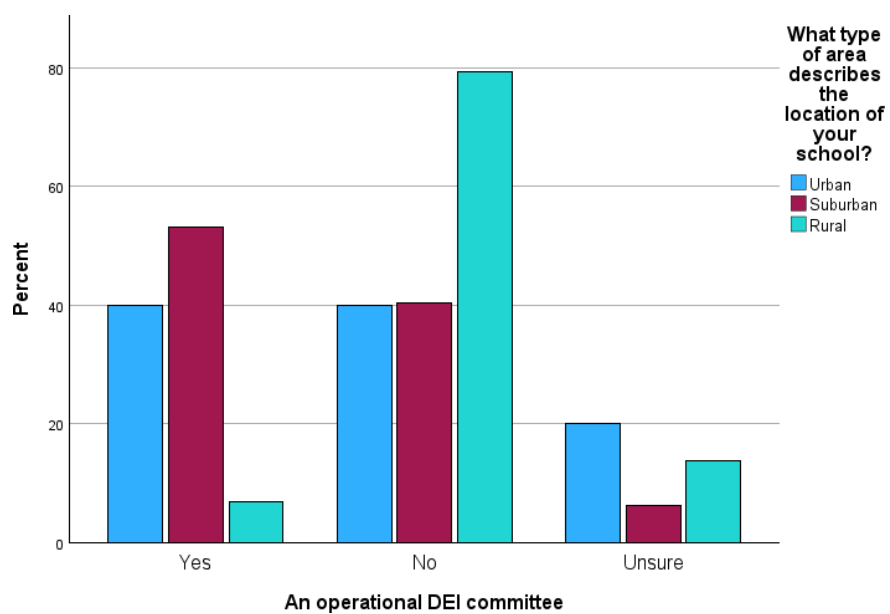
Figure 4.2*Diversity x Explicit Position Statement Regarding DEI***Figure 4.3***Area x Operational DEI Committee*

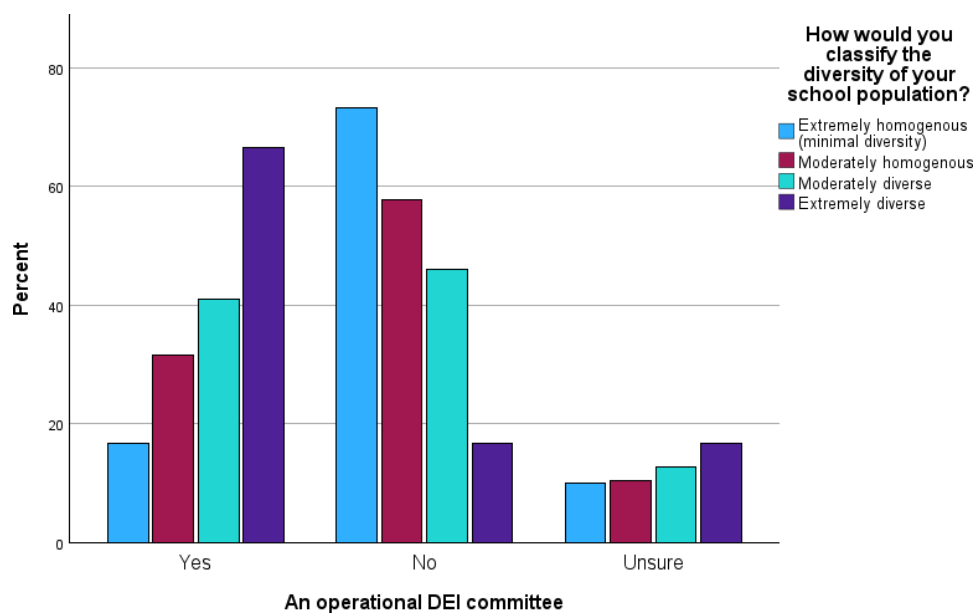
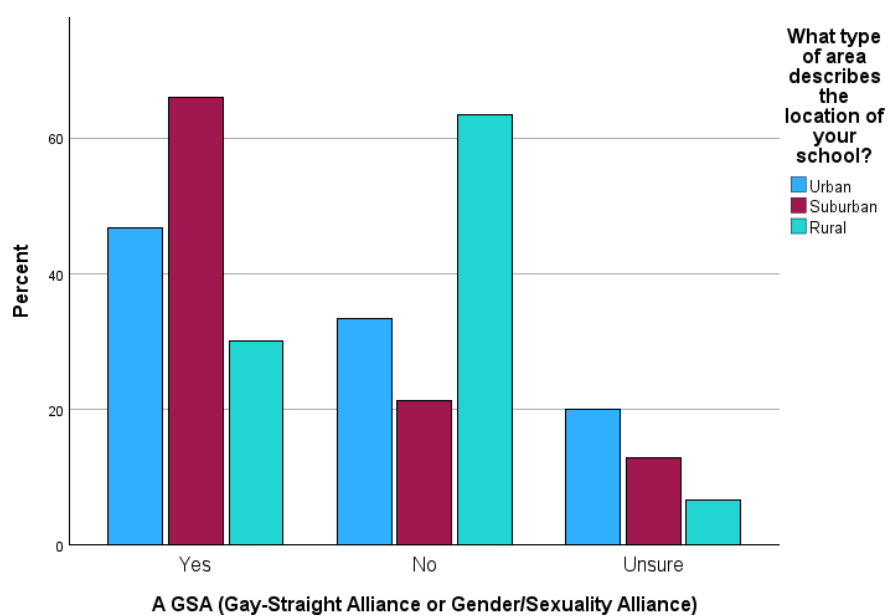
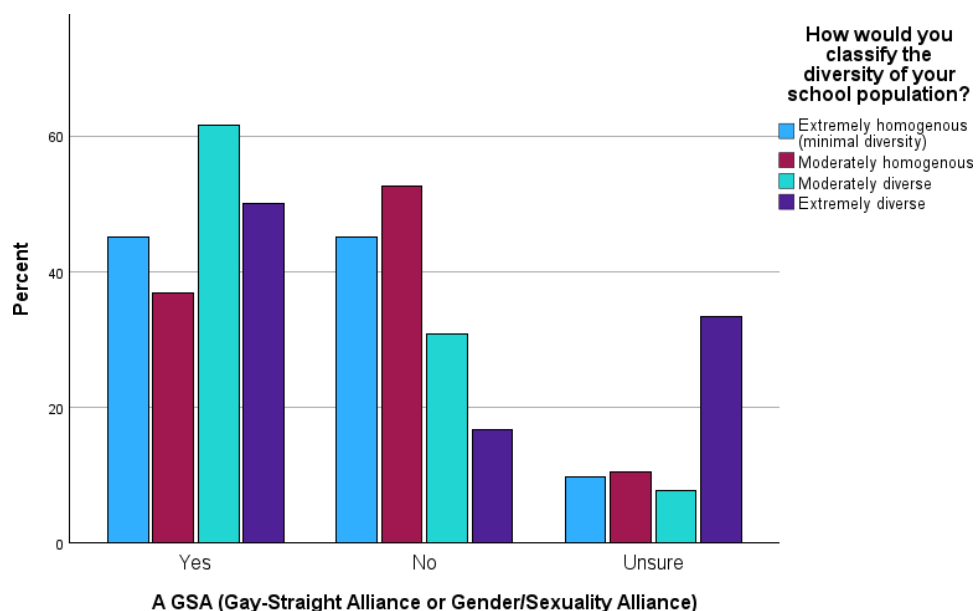
Figure 4.4*Diversity x Operational DEI Committee***Figure 4.5***Area x GSA*

Figure 4.6*Diversity x GSA*

As demonstrated in the crosstabulation graphs, having an explicit position statement regarding DEI as well as an operational DEI committee are both more likely to occur in urban and more diverse areas as compared to more rural areas and those with minimal diversity. This is particularly salient in Figure 4.4, in which the data clearly demonstrate the level of diversity of a district is positively correlated with the presence of an operational DEI committee. Similar results are present regarding GSAs, although not quite as clearly defined as the first two categories. The extreme ends of both area and diversity provide data that could be anticipated in light of the data from the DEI items. However, the middle categories (suburban, moderately homogeneous, moderately diverse) did not follow the same correlation.

All survey items were intended to glean an overall picture of the supports in place for TGNC students as well as the school climate they experience. While the data was useful and thought-provoking, there were no significant relationships found relating to any of the TGNC-

specific items. Thus, further inquiry was necessary to better understand the quantitative data, as was anticipated at the outset of the study's design.

Qualitative Findings

Sample

At the conclusion of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a semi-structured interview to complement the quantitative findings. Thirty-one individuals expressed interest. Of these, 16 successfully scheduled a mutually convenient time for the interview. The interviewees included administrators from both elementary and secondary schools. While participants represented many regions of the Commonwealth, none from the South Central nor Northwestern regions were able to arrange an interview time. Four of the interviews were canceled by participants and unable to be rescheduled, leading to a final interview count of twelve. The interviews consisted of 20 questions relating to administrator perspectives and experiences, school climate and culture, and policy (Appendix D), were conducted via Zoom and recorded with participants' consent. Interviewee demographic and school district information is presented in Table 4.10: *Interviewee Data*, consolidated to only include responses recorded, and not those which none of the interviewees selected.

Table 4.10

Interviewee Data

Variables	Participant responses (<i>N</i> = 12)	
	Number	Percent
<i>Gender identity</i>		
Female	3	25.00%
Male	9	75.00%
<i>TGNC identification</i>		
No	12	100.00%

Variables	Participant responses (N = 12)	
	Number	Percent
<i>Age range</i>		
36–45	8	66.67%
46–55	2	16.67%
56–60	2	16.67%
<i>Education level</i>		
Master's degree	7	58.33%
Doctoral candidate	1	8.33%
Doctoral degree	4	33.33%
<i>Pennsylvania PK-12 administrator certification</i>		
Yes	12	100.00%
<i>Administrative role</i>		
Elementary assistant principal	4	33.33%
Elementary principal	2	16.67%
High school assistant principal	6	50.00%
<i>Years in current position</i>		
At least 1 year but less than 3 years	2	16.67%
At least 3 years but less than 5 years	5	41.67%
At least 5 years but less than 10 years	4	33.33%
10 years or more	1	8.33%
<i>Geographic region</i>		
Southeastern or Philadelphia	5	41.67%
Northeastern	3	25.00%
Central	1	8.33%
Southwestern or Pittsburgh	3	25.00%
<i>Type of school location</i>		
Urban	2	16.67%
Suburban	7	58.33%
Rural	3	25.00%
<i>Socioeconomic status of district</i>		
High	1	8.33%
Medium-high	2	16.67%
Medium	2	16.67%
Medium-low	3	25.00%
Low	4	33.33%

Variables	Participant responses (<i>N</i> = 12)	
	Number	Percent
<i>Diversity of school population</i>		
Extremely homogeneous (minimal diversity)	4	33.33%
Moderately homogeneous	1	8.33%
Moderately diverse	7	58.33%

Themes

Multiple themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews. Five distinct themes encompass the overall picture presented by the interviewees: general acceptance and inclusivity, perspective differences, informality versus formality in policies, community and political constraints, and adaptability and incremental progress.

Theme 1: General Acceptance and Inclusivity

Respondents consistently expressed a dedication to creating a safe, inclusive culture for all students, with a focus on belonging and acceptance. This was expressed as a commitment to student well-being and fostering feelings of belongingness as a core philosophy intended to support all students. Within the context of the interviews the administrators elaborated on how this works to create a safe and inclusive environment for TGNC students. Emphasis was placed on raising empathetic, inclusive individuals through tools like classroom discussions and broadening perspectives.

Really, I always say we are here to raise good humans and create decent people. You know, students who are accepting and understanding that not all students, families, look the same now, right? So if we're doing read-alouds and just talking about it, you know, it's helping students to understand that they don't all have to be the same, look the same,

families aren't all identical. I think it's important just to make them understand the broader world. (Elementary Administrator)

Administrators emphasized the importance of individualized, collaborative support tailored to students' needs and comfort level in their identity expression. Many utilized both internal and external resources to create a comprehensive student support system, partnering with local gender clinics and mental health providers. Additionally, a majority of the districts represented in the interviews conduct regular evaluations of student perceptions of inclusivity and safety, prioritizing their physical and psychological well-being.

Interviewees noted the importance of implementing localized, inclusive solutions preemptively to prevent divisiveness, normalizing gender diversity through gender-neutral facilities and inclusive teaching designs. Students were typically described as largely accepting of their TGNC peers, with few reported instances of bullying related to gender identity or expression. They believe these inclusive practices contribute to this general acceptance. One administrator expressed optimism, stating "students can be educated to be more accepting and understanding, even if the broader community is not fully aligned" (High School Administrator).

Theme 2: Perspective Differences

While identifying an overall climate of acceptance and inclusivity, administrators acknowledged a likely variance in perspective between themselves and TGNC students in their buildings. They understand their efforts at inclusivity paint a picture in their minds that may not fully align with the lived experiences of their students. In particular, many noted the potential negative influence of social media on the experiences of TGNC students. They cite instances of cyberbullying having a negative impact on TGNC youth. While not directly connected to the educational environment, the impact of online interactions certainly has bearing on students'

personal feelings of safety and belonging around their peers, even though it does not fall within the purview of the school's authority.

If I had to pick a percentage, I would say at least 90-95% of our students are very supportive. I would think they'd probably say their percentage is a little different in terms of their perception because they're on social media. More that I'm not on kids' social media, so there might be things going on there. (High School Administrator)

Additionally, interviewees acknowledged the difference in viewpoints sometimes observed between TGNC students and their parents, and the importance of ensuring confidentiality while balancing transparency in sensitive matters. One district has procedure in place ensuring staff do not disclose a student's gender identity or name change to parents unless legally required or directly confronted. Communication with parents is handled respectfully, balancing different beliefs with the need to affirm and support the student's identity.

We do have some parents of transgender or non-binary students who are not comfortable with the idea that their student wants to, you know, be identified differently. I can understand where they're coming from, but also my job is to support the student and that is the stance that we've taken as a school. Our jobs are to support students. (High School Administrator)

Theme 3: Informality vs. Formality in Policies

Overwhelmingly, the administrators interviewed expressed their means of supporting TGNC students rely heavily on informal practices as opposed to formal policies. In fact, only one district had explicitly TGNC-supportive policy in place. They were the first in the Commonwealth to do so, adopting the policy in the spring of 2022. The policy includes guidelines regarding privacy, official records, gender-segregated activities, student information

systems, restroom and locker room accessibility, physical education classes and intramural sports, interscholastic competitive sports teams, dress codes, and discrimination and harassment.

In lieu of official school board approved policy, the majority of schools instead utilize unwritten, informal practices and procedures for supporting the specific needs of TGNC students. Interestingly, many of these practices mirror the policy of the singular district. The most common reason cited for lack of TGNC-specific policy was the perceived success of informal practices in conjunction with a desire to not draw attention to an often-controversial topic, out of fear of creating a problem for these students where one currently does not exist. Concerns were expressed that bringing transgender issues to a formal policy level could spark divisive public debates, potentially worsening outcomes for students. Practices such as relabeling single-use restrooms have been implemented informally, often without drawing attention and thus avoiding potential backlash. One administrator noted “having a policy that is crafted or voted on by a board currently would probably be less supportive for students than what we’re doing in practice” (Elementary Administrator). Instead, administrators rely on existing frameworks such as general anti-bullying and discrimination policies to lead their efforts at creating inclusive environments for TGNC students, allowing them to maintain adaptability to the specific needs of their students.

Theme 4: Community and Political Constraints

As noted above, community and political constraints were cited as the greatest barrier to the development and implementation of specifically TGNC-supportive policies. Administrators struggle to balance advocacy for their students with resistance from conservative community factions. Some offered examples of vocal groups causing an uproar on social media platforms over gender-neutral bathroom policies, or school boards insinuating they would require staff to

out students to their parents without their consent. Except for the district in which such a policy exists, nearly all interviewees noted some level of concern with potential pushback from the community or school board if and when the topic of TGNC students comes up as an official policy discussion.

I do know as an administrator you have to be careful, because we do report to school boards. We have a conservative leaning school board, and so as a school leader, I have to be careful how we navigate. We don't want to create a problem that doesn't exist, if that makes sense. And so sometimes it's better just to navigate it at the school level and not make it a big deal. I honestly think if it ever comes to a public policy debate that it probably would get ugly before it gets solved. So I'm happy now that it hasn't come to that. (High School Administrator)

You're only as progressive as your school board is, so depending on the political ramifications of it, who knows? You're only as good as the board, and you're only as good as the policies will allow you to progress. (Elementary Administrator)

Your board holds a lot of power in their beliefs, and that doesn't necessarily jive with the practice that's in place. So I think if push comes to shove in a policy debate, I would say in a place like this, that we will have unfavorable policy for the support of the practices that already exist. (Elementary Administrator)

Most often, interviewees adopted a mindset of 'if it ain't broke, don't fix it,' explaining their school boards have thus far refrained from engaging in the conversation surrounding supporting TGNC students and allow the schools to continue as they have been. They anticipate this to continue as it appears to be successful and has drawn little, if any, negative attention in the public.

Theme 5: Adaptability and Incremental Progress

Finally, administrators' responses indicated the necessity for adaptability and incremental progress in supporting TGNC students, often evolving along with cultural and societal shifts. Many have worked to adapt the physical configuration of their buildings to allow students to have access to individual, all-gender restrooms, whether due to TGNC identification or just a general need for privacy. This is not always possible due to the layout in some buildings. However, renovations and new construction are largely including these types of facilities.

Districts have made strides in bridging gaps in training and addressing staff hesitation to improve their confidence in handling TGNC inclusivity. The benefit of this has been seen as one administrator has noticed a cultural shift where being TGNC is no longer treated as an 'event' or exceptional topic of conversation, as it was in the recent past. Another said their staff have become more confident in navigating interactions with TGNC students and recognizing the importance of intent versus accidental missteps in the case of using a student's chosen name and/or pronouns. While not always an easy road to navigate, interviewees stressed the importance of encouraging open dialogue and reflection to learn and improve inclusivity efforts, centering compassion in their approaches and actions.

Integration of Quantitative Results and Qualitative Findings

The survey results indicate the vast majority of participants hold personal beliefs that align with supportive attitudes toward TGNC students. This is demonstrated by their level of agreement with statements aligning with the general understanding of transgender and gender non-conformism as seen in the research (Keenan, 2017; Leonard, 2022). The interviews further demonstrated this through the administrators' fervent dedication to creating inclusive educational

environments and fostering a sense of belongingness for their students, in particular those who identify as TGNC.

The significant relationships demonstrated between geographic region and district diversity when compared with the presence of inclusive supports (DEI, GSA) also aligned with the more detailed descriptions provided in the interviews. While all schools and districts represented in the interviews have at least some level of informal practice in place to support TGNC students, it was more comprehensive and often more visible in districts where diversity is greater and less so the more rural an area in which the school operates. Specifically, more diverse and progressive areas had more visible supports in place, whereas those in more rural and politically conservative areas were significantly more cautious in how they approach implementing practices that are blatantly TGNC-supportive, opting instead to address things on a case-by-case basis instead of implementing ongoing, more widespread procedures.

Summary

The information gleaned from the survey and interviews provides insight into the research question investigating what factors influence the successful implementation of transgender-supportive policies in K-12 public school settings across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Absent a clear directive from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, these policy decisions are left to the responsibility of locally elected school boards. The values of the community and local political climate have a meaningful influence on the decisions of these boards. As such, most districts opt to forgo official policy in favor of implementing informal practices and measuring student perception of school belongingness, constantly monitoring and making adjustments to improve these metrics. Indicators such as an active GSA with recently declining enrollment are viewed as demonstrating the acceptance of TGNC students as they

begin to feel more comfortable and less in need of a separate space in which to feel safe.

Districts have creatively developed ways to navigate logistical infrastructure details as well as working through personal conflicts that arise with staff or parents.

This chapter reported on the results and findings from the mixed methods utilized in this study. Survey results were presented from a quantitative perspective, and interview findings from a qualitative one. The next chapter discusses overall implications of the study, limitations, considerations for future research, and how school leaders may become better prepared to support TGNC youth in schools.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Summary of the Study

This research examined the challenges transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) students face in K-12 public schools and explored factors that influence the successful implementation of policies supportive of these students' unique needs. It highlights the failure of current policies to meet TGNC students' needs, which often results in mental health struggles and poor educational outcomes. Key factors for successful policy implementation include administrative support, teacher attitudes, community engagement, student involvement, and political influences.

The literature review underscores the importance of addressing systemic barriers, combating cisnormativity, and creating inclusive educational environments. Recommendations include implementing programs like Welcoming Schools, revising anti-bullying policies to specifically include gender identity, providing cultural competency and unconscious bias training, and ensuring visible support from staff. Research also highlights the need for proactive interventions against gender-based bullying and promoting inclusivity to benefit all students.

Using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, the study collected data from school administrators in Pennsylvania through a survey and interviews. Findings reveal in the absence of clear directives from the Pennsylvania Department of Education, policy decisions largely depend on local school boards influenced by community values and political climates. Many districts adopt informal practices to gauge and improve student belongingness, often viewing indicators like active Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) as signs of progress.

The study acknowledges its limitations, such as the lack of direct input from TGNC youth and geographical constraints. It concludes by emphasizing the importance of empowering

school leaders to support TGNC students, fostering inclusive school cultures, and addressing systemic challenges to improve outcomes. This final chapter will explore implications and recommendations for future research.

Implications

The implications of this research stand both in alignment with and contrast to the suggestions found in the greater body of literature. The research thus far stresses the importance of developing policy that specifically supports TGNC youth, explicitly providing protections based on gender identity and expression (DePedro & Gorse, 2023). Mangin (2020) more specifically indicates these policies should cast a wide net, incorporating considerations of student privacy and disclosure, record-keeping and student information systems, dress codes, extracurricular activities, and more; not merely added to the language of already-existing anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies.

The quantitative data in the current study does not indicate a strong presence of such policy in Pennsylvania K-12 public schools. On the contrary, most respondents explained in interviews they rely instead on informal practices to support TGNC students' needs. While Pennsylvania public school administrators did not refute the position official policy language is beneficial, most expressed confidence informal policies are sufficient, as they perceive them to be successful within their own schools and districts. They further expressed concern surrounding potential ramifications should the idea be officially presented to school boards for policy discussion. Especially in more conservative and rural areas, administrators fear pushback not only regarding the creation of official policy, but also that such a conversation may lead to a more thorough investigation of current practices and the possibility of school boards requiring these informal, supportive practices cease. Administrators stressed the importance of not drawing

attention to practices that might be considered controversial (e.g., allowing students to use the bathroom of the gender with which they identify even if it differs from biological sex assigned at birth), as doing so might lead to the practices being disallowed.

Finally, while the current body of research indicates the need for educators to receive significantly more training and support to effectively create a TGNC-affirmative school culture to foster a shift in mindset encouraging educators to think about gender in new ways and willingly act to disrupt cisnormativity (Mangin, 2022), this suggestion was not supported by the opinions of the respondents in this research study. Interestingly, most noted having a few staff members who question TGNC-supportive practices and do not “get it,” yet they did not feel training was the appropriate means of helping these educators. Instead, they felt one-on-one conversations were of greater benefit in helping explain the practices in place are there to support students, and educators do not necessarily need to understand the transgender spectrum to be inclusive and supportive of TGNC students. While this has been successful for the educators interviewed, it is important to note professional development and training programs can help staff address issues such as misgendering, privacy concerns, and appropriate accommodations, and their value in supporting TGNC students should not be discounted.

Social Justice Implications

The John Lewis Institute for Social Justice (n.d.) states:

Social justice is a communal effort dedicated to creating and sustaining a fair and equal society in which each person and all groups are valued and affirmed. It encompasses efforts to end systemic violence and racism and all systems that devalue the dignity and humanity of any person. It recognizes that the legacy of past injustices remains all around us, so therefore promotes efforts to empower individual and communal action in support

of restorative justice and the full implementation of human and civil rights. Social justice imperatives also push us to create a civic space defined by universal education and reason and dedicated to increasing democratic participation.

Supporting TGNC youth in K-12 public school settings is clearly a social justice issue. It involves ensuring equal rights, protections, and opportunities for all students, regardless of gender identity or expression. The social justice implications of enacting practices supportive of TGNC students in public schools are significant and multifaceted.

Equity and Inclusion

Ensuring TGNC students have access to facilities, resources, and activities aligned with their gender identity helps create a more inclusive learning environment. This promotes fairness by addressing systemic disparities TGNC students often encounter. TGNC students often face discrimination, bullying, and exclusion, which can negatively impact their academic performance and mental health. Ensuring they have the same access to a safe and supportive learning environment is a matter of fairness and educational equity.

Mental Health and Well-Being

Studies show TGNC youth face higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide due to stigma and lack of support. Supportive policies can reduce bullying, discrimination, and social isolation, thereby improving TGNC students' mental health outcomes. Exemplary of this, research has shown affirmation of gender identity is associated with lower rates of depression and suicide among transgender youth (Vance, 2018).

Legal and Civil Rights Protections

Many policies are grounded in federal and state anti-discrimination laws, such as Title IX, which prohibits sex-based discrimination in schools (U.S Department of Education, 2025).

Social justice requires all students be treated with dignity and respect. Laws and policies protecting TGNC students from discrimination align with broader civil rights efforts to ensure all individuals are treated equally in public institutions. Many legal frameworks recognize the rights of TGNC individuals, and schools have an ethical obligation to uphold these same rights.

Ensuring policies align with anti-discrimination laws is part of advancing social justice. Schools that fail to support TGNC students risk legal challenges and potential violations of civil rights protections.

Broader Social Change

Inclusive school policies and practices contribute to the normalization of transgender and gender non-conforming identities in society. By fostering understanding and respect at an early age, schools can play a role in reducing long-term stigma and discrimination against TGNC individuals. Schools play a fundamental role in shaping societal values. When they foster inclusivity and respect for diversity, they contribute to a more just and equitable society for future generations.

By addressing these concerns, schools can help dismantle systemic inequity and promote a culture where all students, regardless of gender identity or expression, can learn and thrive.

Limitations

Public schools face several limitations in supporting transgender and gender non-conforming students. Unfortunately, with the current political climate and subsequent Executive Orders, such as “Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling” (Executive Order No. 14109, 2025), these limitations appear unlikely to improve in the near future.

Laws and policies regarding TGNC student rights vary by state and district. Some areas have protective policies, while others have laws restricting support, such as limitations on

bathroom access, pronoun use, or participation in sports. Schools often struggle with limited funding for staff training, gender-inclusive facilities, and mental health services specifically addressing TGNC students' needs. Some school districts face opposition from parents, community members, or political groups that may not support inclusive policies, leading to conflicts impacting implementation. Many educators and school staff may not have adequate training in gender inclusion, leading to unintentional misgendering, lack of support, or uncertainty about how to navigate sensitive situations. Even with policies in place, transgender students may still face bullying from peers or lack of intervention from staff who feel unequipped to handle gender-based discrimination. Many schools lack adequate counseling services or mental health professionals trained in LGBTQ+ issues, making it harder for TGNC students to find affirming support within the school system. In some cases, TGNC students may not have support at home, which can create challenges for schools in respecting students' identities while also navigating parental rights and involvement. Updating student records (e.g., names, gender markers) can be difficult due to bureaucratic red tape or policies requiring parental consent, making it harder for students to have their identities officially recognized. Despite these challenges, many schools continue to find ways to create inclusive environments through educator training, student advocacy, and supportive policies and practices that prioritize student well-being.

Recommendations

Considerations for Future Research

The scope of this research was limited to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Consideration should be given in the future to expanding the scope to include a wider geographic

range. Participants could be recruited through organizations such as the National Association of Secondary School Principals and/or the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

In addition to expanding the geographical scope, future research should aim to solicit perceptions and perspectives of not only administrators tasked with enforcing policy and practice, but also those directly responsible for implementing these and interacting with TGNC students, both in and outside of the classroom. Voices of teachers, coaches, support staff should be heard. A more comprehensive picture of how these policies and practices function on a daily basis will provide another area of analysis through which to understand how educators create supportive climates or sustain inhospitable climates for TGNC students.

The majority of qualitative respondents in this study were from the high school level, thus it is recommended future research dig deeper into TGNC-supportive practices at the elementary level. M. J. Smith and Payne (2016) note, “numerous scholars have illustrated how elementary schools are, in fact, significant social contexts for the gender socialization of children” (p. 37). As such, it is vital these environments be more closely examined with regard to their role in supporting the needs of TGNC students.

Finally, while barriers will present themselves with Institutional Review Boards, future research should endeavor to include the voices and perspectives of TGNC youth. Who better to speak to the lived experiences of these individuals than they themselves? Including their unique and personal perspective may help to unlock new ideas and allow educators to better understand how to support these students.

School Recommendations

While future research will lead to additional insight, schools can begin working now to create and sustain environments more supportive of TGNC students. Past research as well as the current study inform best practice in this regard.

LGBTQ+ and specifically TGNC individuals should be represented more visibly in the curriculum. This will serve to combat erasure and stereotypical representations of sexual and gender diversity. Similarly, it begins to disrupt the culture of cisnormativity and gendered practices.

Specific efforts should be made to consistently use students' chosen names and pronouns, even in lieu of a legal name or gender marker change. Just as educators commonly respect David's request to refer to him as Dave, or Stephanie as Steph, the same can be done just as easily when David requests to be referred to as Steph. Going a step further, it would be greatly beneficial for students if districts invest in student information systems that allow chosen names to display on rosters, thus preventing deadnaming when substitutes cover, new terms begin, etc.

Perhaps the most salient school recommendation to come from this study is the value in collecting metrics of school belongingness, as self-reported by students. Data can be collected anonymously yet include variables allowing it to be disaggregated by various groups, including TGNC students. Regularly gauging students' perceptions of school belongingness and using that data to adjust and improve practices will ensure needs are continuing to be met as they change over time.

Aligned with the philosophies of the administrators interviewed in this research study, Mangin (2020) also believes much of this work can be accomplished by adopting a proactive approach based on treating everyone with respect, love, and kindness. Instead of addressing

“issues” as they arise, it is better to create welcoming, accepting school environments supportive of all students and staff, regardless of gender identity or other characteristic, be they known or unknown to others. Ongoing work in the area of belongingness and dignity, such as Cobb and Krownapple’s (2019) framework of belonging through a culture of dignity, is necessary to assist in this undertaking. Continuous work in this area will foster better outcomes for not only TGNC students, but everyone within the school environment.

Conclusions and Reflection

Schools have an obligation not only to educate students regarding academic curriculum, but also to prepare them to enter the world of work and become contributing members of society. Creating a sense of belonging for all students is essential to this mission, not only for their individual growth, but also for fostering a society that values inclusion and respect. When students do not feel accepted and respected for who they are, they cannot fully realize their potential. Too much of their energy is spent navigating negativity, stereotypes, fear, and discrimination, rather than focusing on their personal and academic growth. As educators, we have a fundamental responsibility to support students in unlocking their full potential. If we fail to create an environment where they can be their authentic selves, we fail in our most basic duty to both our students and society.

Feedback from educators is encouraging as it relates to accepting all students in practice. Yet without policy informal practices are difficult, if not impossible, to enforce. However, in a political climate unsupportive of TGNC individuals, relying solely on practice may be the best option currently available to educators. Regardless of political or other influences, educators remain morally obligated to act in the best interest of their students. Working to continue

developing educational environments where all students feel welcome and accepted for who they are is a vital first step in this process.

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APPENDIX A: LETTER OF RECRUITMENT

Dear Educator,

My name is Megan Murray; I am a doctoral candidate at Antioch University and a school counselor in Southeastern Pennsylvania. I am recruiting participants for my doctoral research study. The purpose of this study is to explore factors influencing the successful implementation of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) student supportive policy in public school settings across the Commonwealth. Your name and email were obtained from a web-based directory curated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Please consider completing this survey. The survey is optional, and you may exit the survey at any time. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete an educator survey that will take approximately fifteen to twenty minutes to complete and will have the option to opt-in to a semi-structured interview that will last approximately one hour, to be scheduled at your convenience. Survey data will be used only for the purpose of identifying key themes, findings, and results. Your responses will remain anonymous and you will be identified in the research only by a pseudonym. Your feedback is greatly appreciated.

If you have questions, you may email me at xxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx. To participate in the survey please use the link below. I look forward to hearing from you and appreciate your time!

Regards,

Megan Murray, M.A., M.Ed.

Doctoral Candidate

Antioch University

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/mmurray7>

APPENDIX B: ONLINE SURVEY PROTOCOL

Informed Consent

Title of Research Study: Effective Policy Implementation and (TRANS)forming the K-12 Education (CIS)tem

Investigator: Megan Murray, doctoral candidate, Antioch University

The purpose of this study is to understand the factors influencing the successful implementation of TGNC-supportive policies in K-12 public schools. This survey is part of my dissertation research at Antioch University in the EdD in Educational and Professional Practice Program. The information may be used for future research without additional consent.

This survey consists of 17 questions divided into the following three sections regarding: (1) demographics, (2) personal beliefs and understandings, and (3) school/district perspectives. The survey should take you no more than 15-20 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey, you will be asked if you are willing and interested in participating in a follow-up interview that will further investigate your perspective and experiences.

There are minimal, if any, risks from participating in this survey. Your participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity will be anonymous. You will not be asked for your name and all demographic data being collected will be reported as aggregated information. If any questions on this survey regarding TGNC individuals and topics make you uncomfortable, you may choose not to answer that question and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

By participating in this study, you are contributing to society's knowledge regarding educators' perceptions, practices, and school policies relating to TGNC youth. Although there are not direct benefits to the participants of this study, the knowledge gained by the researcher in this study aims to benefit all students by making schools more welcoming and inclusive.

Your data will be submitted to the researcher using the secure website, <https://surveymonkey.com>. Any information collected about you will be kept confidential and secure and only the people working with or overseeing the study will see your data, unless required by law. Electronic data will be kept for three years in the researcher's password-protected computer and on file at <https://surveymonkey.com> on the researcher's password-protected account. Printed data will be kept in a secure locked cabinet. After three years, electronic data will be permanently deleted, and printed data will be shredded and destroyed. Every attempt will be made to keep your data secure to the extent permitted by the technology.

If you have any questions about the survey or research study, please contact me at xxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, contact the Antioch University Online Institutional Review Board Chair, Hays Moulton, at xxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx.

Consent Statement: I have read or had read to me the information describing this study. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I am 18 years of age or older and freely consent to participate. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records. By clicking “Next” below, I am indicating that I have read and understood this consent form and agree to participate in this study.

Please print or save a copy of this page for your records. Thank you for your participation!

Demographics

1. What is your gender identity?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Other
 - e. Prefer not to answer
2. Do you identify as transgender or gender non-conforming (TGNC)?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Prefer not to answer
3. What is your age range?
 - a. 25-35
 - b. 36-45
 - c. 46-55
 - d. 56-60
 - e. 61-65
 - f. 66+
4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
 - a. Bachelor’s degree
 - b. Master’s degree
 - c. Doctoral degree
 - d. Other (please specify)
5. Do you hold a Pennsylvania Department of Education PK-12 Administrator certification?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. In progress
 - d. Prefer not to answer
6. What is your administrative role?

- a. Elementary Assistant Principal
 - b. Elementary Principal
 - c. Middle/Jr. High School Assistant Principal
 - d. Middle/Jr. High School Principal
 - e. High School Assistant Principal
 - f. High School Principal
 - g. Other (please specify)
7. How many years have you been in your current position?
- a. Less than 1 year
 - b. At least 1 year but less than 3 years
 - c. At least 3 years but less than 5 years
 - d. At least 5 years but less than 10 years
 - e. 10 years or more
8. In what region is your school located?
- a. Southeastern or Philadelphia (IUs 22, 23, 24, 25, 26)
 - b. Northeastern (IUs 14, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 29)
 - c. South Central (IUs 12, 13, 15)
 - d. Central (IUs 8, 10, 11, 16)
 - e. Southwestern or Pittsburgh (IUs 1, 2, 3, 7, 27, 28)
 - f. Northwestern (IUs 4, 5, 6, 9)
9. What type of area describes the location of your school?
- a. Urban
 - b. Suburban
 - c. Rural
10. How would you identify the socioeconomic status of your district?
- a. High
 - b. Medium-high
 - c. Medium
 - d. Medium-low
 - e. Low
 - f. Extremely low
11. How would you rate the diversity of your school population?
- a. Extremely homogenous (minimal diversity)
 - b. Moderately homogenous
 - c. Moderately diverse
 - d. Extremely diverse

Personal Beliefs & Understandings

12. Birth gender is either male or female.
- a. Agree

b. Disagree

13. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

	Disagree Completely	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Agree Completely
Gender identity is how someone sees their innermost self.						
Gender identity may be different than assigned birth sex.						
Gender expression is how someone presents themselves externally.						
Gender expression may not conform with socially defined characteristics of male/female.						
People can transition to their internal sense of gender socially or medically.						
Transgender individuals seek attention.						
Transgender identity is a choice and not fixed.						

Gender identity can be fluid.						
Transgender people can identify as straight, lesbian, gay, or bisexual.						

School/District Perspectives

14. Please indicate whether your school/district has the following:

	Yes	No	Unsure
An explicit position statement regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)			
An operational DEI committee			
Written bullying policies and procedures			
Written bullying policies and procedures specific to TGNC (transgender and gender non-conforming) students			
Specific training regarding bullying prevention			
Specific procedures when dealing with TGNC students bullying issues			
A GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance or Gender/Sexuality Alliance)			
Specific policy and practice related to supporting transgender students (e.g., non-gender specific bathrooms, staff development exclusively dealing with TGNC issues)			

15. Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

	Disagree Completely	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Agree Completely
Bullying is a persistent problem in my school for all students.						
TGNC students are bullied more frequently						

than their cisnormative peers.						
TGNC students are frequent victims of bullying and harassment.						
I need additional support in how to deal with issues TGNC students face.						
My staff would benefit from training to develop skills to support TGNC students.						

16. Please indicate whether you have observed the following types of harassment or victimization against TGNC students **BY STUDENTS**:

	Yes	No	Unsure
Made fun of, called names, or insulted			
Rumors spread about			
Pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on			
Threatened with harm			
Forced or tried to be forced into doing something they did not want to do			
Personal property destroyed on purpose			
Intentionally left out or not allowed to join activities			
Cell phones or internet used to say or post harmful things about			

17. Please indicate whether you have observed the following types of harassment or victimization against TGNC students **BY TEACHERS AND OTHER FACULTY & STAFF**:

	Yes	No	Unsure
Made fun of, called names, or insulted			
Rumors spread about			
Pushed, shoved, tripped, or spit on			
Threatened with harm			
Forced or tried to be forced into doing something they did not want to do			
Personal property destroyed on purpose			
Intentionally left out or not allowed to join activities			
Cell phones or internet used to say or post harmful things about			

Semi-Structured Interview Opt-In

18. The purpose of this research study is to understand the factors influencing the successful implementation of TGNC-supportive policies in K-12 public schools.

I would be interested in participating in an interview with the researcher about this topic. All interviews will be coded and identifying information will be redacted. Please leave your contact information and the researcher will contact you if you are selected from the sample.

- a. Name
- b. Email address
- c. Phone number

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Study Purpose

This study explores school professionals' perspectives on policy relating to transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) youth within the school environment. Before taking part in this study, please read the information below. Please check "I Agree" and provide your name, signature, and date at the bottom of the document if you understand the statements and freely consent to participate in a recorded interview.

Study Method

This study utilizes interview-based research to explore school professionals' perspectives and experiences to determine what effective policies and practices schools are implementing to support these students, what issues arise with these practices/policies, and what is hindering school professionals from utilizing the other policies/practices that past research has shown to be effective in supporting these students. The study is being conducted by Educational and Professional Practice doctoral student Megan Murray of Antioch University, and it has been approved by the Antioch University Institutional Review Board. Participation in the study will involve one, one-hour interview via video- or tele-conference, conducted with the primary researcher, Megan Murray.

Interviews will be recorded and transcribed upon participant consent. The recordings will be used so the primary researcher may examine participants' perspectives on working with TGNC students, and how the school, its policies, and/or other factors impact the school experiences of these students. Participation is strictly confidential. Individual responses will not be presented and/or linked to participants. The recordings will not include participant names or other identifiers to link participants to recordings.

Study Risks and Benefits

This project could pose a potential risk for you because you will be sharing personal details about your experiences as a school leader. However, the interview does give you the opportunity to speak about how you administer complex policies and increase your own awareness about your leadership by participating in the process. Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research project will help the investigator better understand how policy implementation occurs in a school setting.

Participant time and consideration in responses are greatly appreciated and will contribute to the broad understanding of the care and safety of TGNC youth in the school environment, as well as what policies/strategies are in place to improve the outcomes for these students. Please keep in mind when responding to questions, only consider your experience working with TGNC youth.

Participation is voluntary; refusal to take part in the study involves no penalty or loss of benefits to which participants are otherwise entitled, and participants may withdraw from the study at any time. During your interview, you have the right to decline to answer any questions you prefer not to answer. Participants will not receive credit or monetary compensation. Study results will be provided to participants upon request.

Confidentiality

Interviews will be recorded with the consent of the participant. The recording(s) will be stored as audio files, will be transcribed, and saved in password-protected electronic documents. All research data, including written notes/responses, recordings, and electronic data files, will be retained for three years following the end of the data analysis. At that time, data transcription files, written notes, paperwork recordings, and electronic files will be destroyed or permanently deleted. During the time prior to three years after study completion, all hard copy data files will be stored in a locked box securely located within the primary researcher's residence and all electronic data files will be stored in a password-protected file on the primary researcher's personal computer. At no time will individual study data be available for public review. Subjects may withdraw from the study at any time and may request their interview data not be used in the study.

Contact Information

If participants have further questions about this study or their rights, or if they wish to file a complaint or concern, they may contact:

Primary Researcher:

Mrs. Megan Murray, Antioch University
Educational and Professional Practice doctoral candidate
xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx

Dissertation Chair:

Dr. Emiliano Gonzalez, Antioch University
Department of Education
xxxxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx

Institutional Review Board
Antioch University Online
Hays Moulton, IRB Chair
xxxxxxxx@xxxxxxx.xxx

Your signature on this form grants the researcher permission to record you as described above during participation in the aforementioned research study. The researcher will not use the

recording for any other reason than those stated in the consent form without your written permission.

☐ I have read the above information and provide my consent to participate in the research study by way of recorded interview and agree to have the recording transcribed.

Participant's Name

Participant's Signature

Date Signed

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Demographic/Personal Information

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
2. Have you always worked in schools? In what capacity or what did you do prior to becoming an administrator?

Personal Perspectives & Experiences

3. Based on your current knowledge, define the term transgender or gender non-conforming (TGNC) or state what TGNC means to you.
4. Describe any personal experiences you have had with TGNC students.

School Climate and Culture

5. Are you aware of any TGNC students in your school?
6. How would you describe the overall climate and culture of your school? Specifically, for TGNC students?
7. If I interviewed a student at your school that identified as TGNC, what might they share with me about the school and staff?
8. In what ways does your school/district provide training, resources, and support for the creation of an affirming and supportive environment for all students regardless of gender identity and/or expression?
9. Describe building procedures utilized at your school that are inclusive to TGNC students.
10. What is your overall perception of the effectiveness of your school/school district's response to TGNC student needs? Please explain.

Policy

11. What policies and practices, whether formal or informal, are in place to support and create a safe environment for TGNC students in your school or district? Share about the process the district undertook in developing and implementing these policies and how stakeholders were involved throughout the process.
12. How has the implementation of policy impacted the overall school climate and culture? Particularly regarding inclusivity, respect, and support for TGNC students?
13. Have policies about TGNC students evolved in your school/district?
14. What responsibility do you have in enacting this policy in your school?
15. Who did you involve on your staff to help implement the policies related to TGNC students?
16. In what ways does your school/district provide training, resources, and support for faculty and staff to ensure the effective implementation of these policies?
17. How do you measure the effectiveness of these policies in your school?
18. What challenges, if any, have arisen during implementation of your school's policies? How has your school addressed and/or overcome challenges? Are there any areas of ongoing improvement and/or adjustment?

Final Thoughts

19. What do you think the future of your school/district's policy will be?

20. Is there anything about school or district responses to the needs of TGNC students you think is important for me to know, but we did not talk about today?