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Trans Action and Poetic Justice: Retrospective Trans Narratives of High School

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Trans Action and Poetic Justice: Retrospective Trans Narratives of High School

by
Mary Waring

A Dissertation Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Education

2020
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Doctoral Program in Interdisciplinary Educational Studies
College of Education, Information, and Technology
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DEDICATION

To my students

Queer, trans, non-binary, and cis

Those that I have taught

Those I have yet to meet

You are an inspiration

Hold my feet to the fire

I would not have it any other way

To my children

Madison and AJ

Thank you for your love

Thank you for sharing me

Knowing that there is enough love for everyone
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was possible because of the five participants who were gracious enough to share their stories. Their voices are a beacon of strength and hope. It was an honor and privilege to have their life stories cross over and become a part of my story.

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Thank you to my family and friends for your interest. Thank you for giving me spaces where I could test and talk about my ideas. Thank you for understanding every time I said I had work to do. Thank you for all the little celebrations along the way. You believed in me and walked alongside me whenever I questioned myself. I will forever be grateful to you.

This dissertation is a shared accomplishment. PopPop, even though you could not see me finish, I know you have been with me in spirit. Your unwavering belief that I should and would do it sustained me. Sometimes in the wee hours of a late-night writing session, I felt your presence, and I knew you were there telling me to keep going, so I did.
Abstract

Trans students are part of a heteronormative culture of shared spaces within secondary education. Spaces that are complicated by external and internal factors that simultaneously contradict and complement each other. Functioning within a Queer Theory framework, this qualitative study explores the complex relationships between student agency, student identity, and school function, as expressed in the retrospective accounts of five trans participants who all attended suburban high schools in New York. Poetic transcription challenges the extant research of trans students. Studies that predominately consolidate the transgender experience under the umbrella of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and questioning (LGBTQ), a conflation that creates confused understandings of gender identity. In addition to this, trans enumerated research primarily reports predictive factors that identify trans students as a higher risk marginalized population. Cumulatively, these research strands serve to perpetuate troubling discourses that influence educational practices on both the institutional and pedagogical levels. This study disrupts this discourse, sharing the retrospective narrative of trans student voices and exposing educational policy and methods that, at the very best, are well-intentioned, and at their worst, are oppressive or exclusionary. Participant trans actions serve as a call for poetic justice, empowerment, and positive representation of trans students.

Keywords: Queer, trans, retrospective, high school, poetic transcription
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Trans Action and Poetic Justice: Retrospective Trans Narratives of High School

I’m sending this out as an email to all of my teachers this year, to make you aware of some information that is important to my education here at XXXXXX high school. I am a transgender person - specifically, I am nonbinary. Basically, what that means is I am a gender that is neither male nor female. Since the way in which people interact with and speak about each other is so dependent on gender, it is usually necessary for me to disclose this information at the beginning of each year, to let people know how to refer to me.

(Excerpted from Appendix A: Identity Disclosure Letter)

Chapter One: Introduction

“My name is Ms. Waring, and I go by the pronouns she/hers.” This greeting is part of my first day of school routine. An introduction that I would never have imagined or understood as a first-year teacher circa 1999. A privileged cis-gender identity, combined with a single multicultural education course, left me woefully unprepared for future students who would make use of gender-neutral pronouns. Twenty-one years later, an identity disclosure email from Elie, a fifteen-year-old trans student, forced me to acknowledge that I was both uninformed and ill-prepared despite the best of intentions. As the daughter of a first-generation immigrant mother of Vietnamese descent and an Irish American father, my life straddled a metaphorical hyphen. Black hair, almond-shaped eyes, freckles, and a full name that contradicted my appearance, left me feeling like a pelican amongst a flock of swans. This perspective of knowing life as both a part of and separate from the cultural norm inspired my career choice. I believed that the teaching of literature and others’ stories would provide an opportunity to celebrate and help young people navigate their struggles with difference.

The personal history of being othered postulated a naïve belief that any experience of marginalization creates the authority to reach and speak for many different types of marginalized students based on shared beliefs concerning difference and feelings that everyone understands to
some degree. As a result, creating and bonding over universal truths within society and human nature became a dominant theme in the curriculum and practice of my classroom. In English, the curriculum easily moves from plot summary of literary works to discussions concerning philosophy, culture, and ethics. Topics concerning human rights, racism, and prejudice were also a significant part of the literature covered. For years, I truly believed that differences were checked at the door in my classroom, and for thirty-nine minutes, both students and teacher modeled a color and gender-blind classroom that supported equality for all. My goal was to create a shared, inclusive community that emphasized the ties that bind humanity together.

Ironically, my classroom's racial demographics were predominately Caucasian the year that Elie was a student in my class. Besides being unfamiliar with Elie’s trans identity, I also overlooked their Peruvian and Hispanic background. My blatant disregard of student diversity had allowed white privilege and heteronormativity to prevail. Elie’s letter unraveled my personal hubris, one that colluded in educational practices that only superficially address or ignore the nonnormative.

In part, the pressure of following a required curriculum and preparing students for Regents exams left little room to consider whether my students felt a disconnect due to the lack of representation and diversity within the curriculum. Within my lessons existed an unexamined heteronormative and racial bias that shaped every assignment and discussion. In celebrating what unites humanity, the intricate beauty of diversity was not only overlooked; it silenced the differences that form identity and experience. The required curriculum was diverse, in the sense that there were multiple cultures represented, which provided some windows of the world. Shorter literary works and excerpted passages from Martin Luther King, Alice Walker, Amy Tan, and Malala Yousafzai supplemented full-length novels. The core texts, which were the course's primary units, included Lord of the Flies by William Golding, Night by Elie Wiesel, Fahrenheit
451 by Ray Bradbury, and Animal Farm by George Orwell. These texts' central perspective remains Anglocentric and do not reflect the diversity of contemporary race, culture, gender, or socioeconomic status. There were additional informational, non-fiction centered texts incorporated to reflect real-life reading, but again these shorter works were supplemental. Not only was my classroom not color or gender-blind, but neither was the curriculum. Instead, the white normative was emphasized by marginal attempts at inclusion.

Despite these efforts to diversify the texts, there were no mirrors that explicitly reflected individuals' lives outside of the male and female normative binary. The windows and mirrors metaphor proposed by Emily Style (1988) suggests that there are many blind spots within the existing curriculum of schools. Students need to see themselves and others to avoid a limited and limiting view of the human experience. This self-defining moment was one that would coincide with New York State’s Common Core curriculum modules, a shift that very explicitly laid out unit modules, scripted lessons, and required texts. Elie’s e-mail challenged me to be more critical of a humanistic educational approach that rested within the conception that mankind and the human experience consist of universal elemental characteristics (Braidotti, 2018). Unsure of how to proceed, I began by addressing the requests made in their letter. Changes were made within the classroom and on technology-based platforms used for student submissions and classwork to ensure that Elie’s name change and pronoun usage were acknowledged and respected. Administrators and other support staff provided formal guidance to adopt those changes, and these were discussed in faculty meetings as well. The school year progressed, and Elie seemed comfortable, but an unsettling feeling of guilt lingered in me. Growing frustration with mandated professional development that did not include lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) student concerns intensified my feelings of incompetency
and self-reproach. That tension fueled a journey of self-directed professional learning, a reexamination of my own identity and subjectivity, and a desire to improve the chasms existing betwixt and between.

**Diversity and Representation**

One of the most intimidating chasms was realizing that to better educate myself; I would need to bridge a difference that I could empathize with but never completely understand. Ideally, Elie deserved a teacher that they could relate to, not a privileged, poorly prepared, and potentially condescending cisgender teacher. Many students do not see adults in school settings that reflect their own diverse backgrounds. This disparity results from an educational workforce that is 80% white (US Department of Education, 2016). When the call for diversity encompasses distinctions of gender and sexuality, it is much more challenging to quantify the percentage of LGBTQ teachers. LGBTQ educators have the most direct way of creating meaningful representation and inclusion for LGBTQ students (Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013; Mayo, 2008; Mulcahy et al., 2016; Wald et al., 2002). GLSEN, formerly known as the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, reports that LGBTQ teachers are more likely to display signs of support, incorporate inclusive curriculum, and advocate for queer-inclusive policies and professional development in comparison to their heterosexual colleagues (Wright, 2015).

Despite GLSEN’s report, many educators are not comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity. Closeted teachers face a complicated negotiation of secrecy and exposure enmeshed in other personal and professional identities such as race (Brockenbrough, 2011). While the benefits of positive adult LGBTQ representation are encouraging, many students never experience them. Instead, students are far more likely to experience a lack of representation within the curriculum and staff. While I will never be a mirror that reflects an
LGBTQ identity, it is crucial to discover how to better support students who are marginalized because of their gender, gender expression, or sexual orientation. The intent of this dissertation is not to ignore the lack of or need for LGBTQ professional representation in schools but to deal with the nature of events as they currently stand. The overarching goal is to provide a resource for other allies in education, who recognize the need to discover better ways to advocate for non-binary student populations—at the same time, emphasizing specifically the often overlooked and misunderstood trans youth population (Budge et al., 2018; Budge et al., 2016).

Trans, Transgender, Transgender Theory

In the 1990s, the use of “transgender” outside medical terminology was the result of Leslie Feinberg's pamphlet, "Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time has Come," which also described the concepts of gender non-conformity, gender expression, and preferred pronouns (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Transgender theory, born of shared frustrations over representation in LGBTQ and Queer studies, is a theoretical orientation regarding the lived experiences of transgender individuals. In Elie’s identity disclosure letter, written in 2016, they describe themself as “a transgender person - specifically, nonbinary.” While many transgender individuals identify as male or female, others like Elie use non-binary to indicate an experience of gender that may blend male and female elements or do not identify with any gender. In part, Elie’s description reflects the language available at the time; since then, the use of the term transgender has been contested. Some prefer to use trans as a more inclusive identity label for trans and non-binary identities. They express dissatisfaction with perceived outdated medical jargon related to the transsexual identity. Others contest the merging of transman or transwoman and suggest trans* as a more inclusive option (Budge et al., 2016). This option has been met with criticism by those who consider the symbol a footnote or afterthought. The controversy is
also reflected in academic journals calling for trans papers that build on transgender scholarship while embracing the inter-relatedness of identities hoping to transform beyond gender politics (Stryker et al., 2008). For the purposes of this research study, trans is a shorthand version of transgender, and both are used. Neither term indicates medical or hormonal changes, and both describe anyone who is not cisgender. Trans is often viewed as a relatively recent generational term, and as such, it will be used to affirm the trans student population and the participants of this study.

**Statement of the Problem**

The misrepresentation of trans students creates and perpetuates troubling discourses. These conversations are partially a result of limited preservice and in-service learning opportunities for educators. Extant educational research of trans students centers around homophobia, transphobia, bullying, violence, and at-risk indicators (Formby, 2015). Due to an increased level of attention that stems from national policy changes and media controversy over gendered spaces, many schools approach trans issues from an at-risk or vulnerable community perspective. The resulting deficit model has the potential to marginalize further and reinforce harmful practices (Tuck, 2009). Existing methods and policies function within an institutionalized heteronormative, cisgender agenda that consolidates trans students under the umbrella of LGBTQ. This one size fits all process confuses important distinctions regarding gender and sexual orientation that do not transfer across the gender spectrum. Beyond the issues of professional development, at-risk stereotypes, and collective identities, there is a critical urgency to explore trans students' experiences outside of research steeped in deficit thinking. Retrospective accounts of high school experiences provide a narrative authority and insight into the realities of the high school experience for trans youth populations.
Research Questions

The following questions guide and reflect an interrogative qualitative research design (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

- How do trans people narrate their retrospective accounts of the high school experience?
- What do the retrospective high school narratives of trans people reveal about the relationships and influences of identity, agency, and school function?

While my own trans students' needs brought me to the topic, a developing national transgender discussion suggests there is much more to consider. Between 2009 and 2017, trans student rights experienced an extreme pendulum swing. As a result of the use of executive powers and President Obama and President Trump's contradictory agendas, Title IX protections regarding trans policies in schools were deadlocked and, in some states, reversed (Jones, 2018). In October of 2018, leaked documents from the Department of Health and Human Services include a memo from the Trump administration regarding the need for a legal definition of sex “on a biological basis that is clear, grounded in science, objective and administrable” (Burke, 2019). Narrowing the meaning of sex in such a manner threatens the transgender population and the intertwined communities that are a part of those populations. On June 15, 2020, the Supreme Court upended Trump’s restrictions by ruling that sex discrimination in the workplace includes both sexual orientation and gender identity (Sanger-Katz & Green, 2020). This decision provides legal interpretations that have the potential to increase trans youth legal protections.

Schools function and, by extension, teachers are employed within institutionalized spaces rooted in government policies. Federal, state, and district level educational authorities can and have regulated teacher expression of speech (curriculum and instruction) during school and at school-sponsored activities where teachers are expected to be politically neutral. The
controversy surrounding lesson plans, classroom libraries, and handouts that include trans topics, have created mixed messages for teachers who fear negative backlash (Iasevoli, 2018; Smith, 2018; Toscano, 2017; Yettick et al., 2017). Despite expanding transgender civil rights, disconcerting debates continue over trans youth, gendered spaces in schools, and gender authenticity. This discourse is particularly troubling considering how it might impact school climate and endanger trans students (The Associated Press, 2019; Andrews, 2017; Finely, 2019; Grinberg, 2019). This dissertation explored dimensions of the trans high school experience that provide a queer counternarrative of liberation and empowerment for trans youth that move conversations beyond bathroom safety or validating gender.

**The Complexities of Queer**

Multiple definitions of the word “queer” complicate the development of a queer counternarrative. In 16th century English speaking countries, queer referred to something strange or illegitimate (Barker & Scheele, 2016). Over the next two centuries, queer would shift from being used as a general insult to a homophobic slur. This negative connotation makes it essential to explain the context of queer definitions, which include using the term to describe identity, community, and theory. In the 1980s, LGBT activists adopted the word queer as an identity term to counteract homophobic language and its use as a form of hate speech. By reclaiming a queer community identity, the word’s confrontational history was intended to engage activism and disrupt prejudiced, homophobic, violent, and oppressive discrimination (Rand, 2014). With a sensitive history of stigma and violence, queer has continued in its use as a collective identity for anyone outside of heteronormative gender identities or sexualities. The preference for other identity terms, such as “homosexual” and “gay,” is often critiqued as a less inclusive umbrella stemming from connotations related primarily to male-centric sexual orientation (Berlant et al.,
The ensuing conflicts surrounding the use of the word queer revolve around the concepts and applications of gender, sex, and sexual orientation.

The distinctions between gender and sex are typically presented in two ideologies, the biological and social (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Students are often taught that sex is determined by physical anatomy, sexual orientation is differentiated as an attraction, and gender is represented as behaviors and expectations associated with biological sex. These terms, while often approached from the perspective of categorizing female/male (sex), woman/man (gender), and heterosexual/homosexual (sexual orientation), are simplistic distinctions that do not accurately reflect the complexity of the world. Early feminist theorists defined gender as a social construction. They opposed gender inequality and discrimination, specifically between men and women. Within this model, sex is biologically fixed at birth, and biological sex collapses within gender to form the essence of gender identity (Acker, 1992). Other feminists contend that biological and sociological distinctions separate the inseparable, suggesting that sex, sexual orientation, and gender are socially constructed and intertwined (Lorbell & Farell, 1991). Judith Butler (2004), a Queer Feminist theorist, elaborated upon this to explain gender as performative actions, repeated performances, that are aligned with shifting dominant societal norms over time. Her analysis of gender is often cited as foundational to Queer theory (Acker, 1992; Barker & Scheele, 2016; Gill-Peterson, 2018; Jagoose, 1996).

In academia, the Queer theoretical framework is rooted in the Post-structural Feminist rejection of patriarchal gender conceptions, suggesting the representation of a fluid and mutable gender (Butler, 2004; Sedgwick, 1990). Additionally, Queer Theory reflects Feminist traditions in its intent to critique and deconstruct the various power relations and institutionalized discourses that produce heteronormalized sexual orientation and gender identities (Foucault,
1990; Butler, 2004). While some caution against the risk of replicating earlier gay and lesbian studies, Queer theorists extend the gender conversation beyond homosexuality to incorporate a fluid spectrum of sexual orientation and identity in constant formation and reformation (Jagoose, 1996). Dilley (1999) suggests that Queer theory is best explained through an examination of the three categories of published studies, which include: an analysis of the lived experiences of those considered outside the heteronormative, a juxtaposition of non- and heteronormative lived experience, and an examination of how/why those lived experiences are deemed non-normative. This archival review of queer research indicates that heteronormativity has been at the center of research that explores beyond the cisgender. Critics of Queer theory raise questions surrounding individual agency, identity politics, and a constrictive emphasis on heteronormativity (Barker & Scheele, 2016; Ruffolo, 2016).

For some transgender individuals, who may pass as cisgender, heteronormativity, agency, and identity are muddied. Transgender Theory has been suggested as a way to move beyond identity politics and concentrate very specifically on the often misrepresented realities of transgender-specific issues surrounding subjective gendered identity and sexed embodiment (Stryker & Whittle, 2006). Transgender individuals often live with physical bodies in conflict with their internal sense of gender identity. Additionally, the degree of masculinity or femininity a transgender person expresses does not dictate their gender identity. While Transgender Theory articulates shared concepts of gender drawn from Feminist and Queer ideologies, it creates additional complexities regarding the social, biological, and medical (technological) constructions of gender. The term transgender, like the word queer, is often obscured by contradicting perspectives and interpretations of gender.
For example, arguments regarding biological sex, gender expression, and gender transitioning have excluded transgender populations. Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs) contend that transition is a submissive act of conformity, and transwomen are not women (Barker & Scheele, 2016). Most of this criticism is centered within the concept of gendered authenticity and labels, including transgender, transsexual, intersex, and trans, all of which have been used to categorize living bodies and self-knowledge (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Hines, 2019). These transgender associated labels define and group distinctions within the transgender identity based on shared physical or social qualities. While these labels are designed to simplify understanding, they contradict the essential meaning of transgender, which is intended to cross, go beyond, and challenge normalization. This transcendent quality frees Transgender Theory from many of the constraints within earlier gender theories, but it also limits as a result of its beyond definition status. Feinberg (1996) describes how the he/she pronoun usage in the English language is symptomatic of a lack of vocabulary that corresponds with the complexity and exclusion of the transgender identity.

Transgender Theory exists within the problematic position of an emerging field utilizing labels that inadequately describe and vocabularies that are continually shifting. The relatively nascent nature of Transgender Theory as it currently exists often places transgender studies within a queer residency. This hospitable union has also benefited and helped refine Queer Theory. Transgender individuals who medically transition are the physical embodiment of what was once theoretical (Prosser, 1998). Despite the tensions and contradictions regarding which theoretical school the transgender population is best represented by, Whittle (2013) emphasizes collaboration and suggests the boundaries between the two theories might be more fluid than originally perceived. Other researchers suggest a queering or appreciation of the queer bonds
within Queer Theory that can address the diversity of sex, gender, and sexual orientation by joining theoretical alliances (Gregory, 2019; Hines, 2006; Valocchi, 2005). For this dissertation, the varied contexts and applications of queer provide a multi-layered lens intended to deconstruct universal oversimplifications, navigate arising tensions, and imagine further possibilities for trans students.

**Trans Youth: Demographics and Background Factors**

Trans students are a relatively under-researched population of interest in the United States. In fact, few research resources exist that provide concrete demographic information. The Williams Institute (Herman et al., 2017) estimates that 150,000 youth between the ages of 13-17 identify as trans. This study also reports that of the entire transgender population, the youngest group is also the largest compared to other age brackets. Trans students are concentrated in geographic areas that mirror relative population sizes across the country (California, Texas, New York, and Florida). Transgender individuals are unique in that they do not identify within established gender categories and often transgress various sexualities, gender norms, gender expressions, and gender roles (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2007). This fluidity and other intersectionality nuances related to race, culture, and socio-economic status complicate their identification within a cohesive grouping (Budge et al.; Burnes & Chen, 2012; 2016; Kumashiro, 2001).

Trans students face an institutionalization that positions the transgender experience within the umbrella of LGBTQ. This acronym initializes and supports misunderstandings of sex and gender. Transgender is also an umbrella term for non-normative gender identities. Unlike LGB, transgender does not indicate gender identity, gender expression, physical anatomy, or sexual orientation. Disagreements exist within multiple parties, such as intersex and transsexual,
who contest inclusion or exclusion. “This notion of the transgender umbrella can be found seemingly everywhere: in nearly every published definition of the term transgender, on hundreds of websites and in activist pamphlets, in trainings and talks given by activists and scholars, and in my interviews with more than 100 activists” (Davidson, 2007). Hill et al. (2014) illustrate a literal umbrella from which numerous trans identities are suspended to visualize the transgender identity umbrella. Another popular figure is The Gender Unicorn, developed by Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER). This figure is used as a family-friendly representation of the transgender distinctions of gender identity, gender expression, sex assigned at birth, and physical/emotional attraction in transgender identities (Trans Student Educational Resources, 2014). While the suggestion of a shared identity is apparent, both portrayals oversimplify significant distinctions. To merge and develop these existing visualizations, I developed Figure 1 to present sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation as distinct and converging continuums that provide more specificity regarding diversity within transgender identities.
Figure 1. The Transgender Umbrella

Figure 1. Transgender populations identify along multiple continuums related to sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientations.

Kumashiro (2002) shares Debbie’s story, which supports this suggested model and serves purposefully to depict multiple gender identities that share the openly paradoxical experience of simultaneously rejecting and embracing gender, gender roles, and/or gender expression.

Debbie’s assigned gender at birth was male (AMAB), but they currently identify as transgender MtF. They also identify with the female gender, although sometimes presenting themselves through a mixed-gender expression. Debbie views gender as a continuum and sees themself as transitioning between two genders while occupying multiple sides of continuum binaries.

Debbie embodies the complexities of gender identity and gender expression and the limitations
of language based on the distinctions between male and female. This complexity is further muddied by gender stereotypes that dictate what gender should look like and Debbie’s gender performance, which is incongruent with normative expectations. By choosing to exist within and beyond binaries, individuals like Debbie challenge, destabilize, and create tension in societal attempts to define transgender neatly.

Student populations that identify as trans disrupt normalizing discourses on sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. This, in turn, has created the necessity for a paradigm shift within academic research. Recent medical field changes have acknowledged this by removing gender identity disorder within mental illness diagnosis guidelines and adopting the term gender dysphoria (Zeglin, 2016). Dysphoria is the distress and discomfort resulting from the physiological differences between gender identity and gender assigned at birth. This change has been received by many as a step toward the reduction of transgender stigmatization. However, there exists the legitimate concern that despite the benefits of health insurance coverage, a diagnosis of dysphoria remains pathologizing. In the field of education, research traditions of understanding the other in comparison to the norm have moved toward concerns over equity and inclusion in schools across the LGBTQ spectrum. However, these goals are contradictory, depending on how inclusion is defined or achieved (Orr et al., 2015). Trans students do not necessarily have the same experiences as their LGBQ peers or the desire to be designated into a normalized or collective identity.

School systems often perpetuate superficial understandings of trans students, and this spills over into many other areas. For example, to support student needs, pre-service educators often study Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943), which presents a hierarchy of needs built upon each other. This theory originates from Maslow’s intent to describe the process of improving
motivation among psychiatric patients and would later be inappropriately applied to educational settings. Simplifying student needs creates the impression that students are best supported once primary needs are established, and higher-level considerations such as belonging cannot be addressed until foundational needs are met. The application of Maslow’s theory in educational settings may present itself as common sense, a lesson in the difference between need and want. Safety measures must precede students facing the challenges of Shakespeare or Calculus. This perception does not account for the reality of trans students who may be safely protected from overt threats of physical violence but experience emotional and psychological threats. These covert attacks might inhibit concentration, socialization, or attendance. Maslow’s theory, therefore, does not acknowledge the blurred reality of need and want. To visualize this, I created a concept map to illustrate this complexity and the many elements at work in conjunction with the trans high school experience for students (see Figure 2).
Figure 2. The relationship between student action, school function, and student identity is represented in the figure as a triangle supported by three circles. Each circle contains interrelated factors influenced by both contradictory and complementary forces during high school (9-12).

This figure represents this study’s approach to the complicated crossings of transgender youth.

The purpose of this study is to explore retrospective trans narratives of high school, specifically examining how the relationship between student identity, agency, and the functions of school shape experiences.
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework establishes not only the lens through which the data is collected, analyzed, and interpreted but also provides integral concepts that build the researcher’s positionality and help guide a qualitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldana & Omasta, 2017). The primary approaches that frame this study include Deconstructivism, Queer Theory, and Intersectional theory. Within this orientation, it is crucial to recognize significant contributions of both the Post-Structuralist and Feminist perspectives. This acknowledgment is especially valid as it relates to the earlier discussion of establishing a queer landscape to explore the tensions surrounding the high school experiences of trans students.

Deconstructing Researcher Positionality

One of the challenges in identifying myself as a heterosexual, cisgender, high school English teacher is that I am also positioning myself as a potential interloper. While there are valid considerations regarding unwelcome and inauthentic representations of trans students, as a teacher, there is a shared culture bound by the school and classroom. A situational identity is formed by those who share space, and these collective experiences provide an opportunity to negotiate between the contradicting layers of my position (Villenas, 1996). While I am not a part of the transgender community, as a teacher for over two decades, my work within the classroom has sought to negotiate an individual and mutual understanding of life and literature. Despite these goals, there have been instances where the seemingly benign classroom management application of “Ladies and gentlemen, back to work.” unintentionally transmits a subtle and oppressive message. While my practitioner status provides an access point for this study, I must expand my own self-awareness to include the deconstruction of subjective assumptions.
regarding gender, identity, and sexual orientation that may influence or reinforce institutionalized heteronormative values.

The Deconstructivist paradigm calls into question socially constructed truths and their inherent contradictions (Lather, 2006). Deconstruction is typically attributed to the work of Jacques Derrida, who has also been defined as a Post Structuralist scholar. Derrida (1981) proposed a deconstruction of classical rhetoric and its implicit philosophy. As a theoretical position, deconstruction serves as an examination of the limits and undecidability of meaning and knowledge (Cilliers, 2005). The intent is not to be destructive, but to break down perspectives that ignore the impact of contradictory discourses. Some teachers view the Constructivist philosophy of building and adding to the existing knowledge base as a positive and more productive endeavor. While the Deconstructivist paradigm is often negatively perceived and misunderstood as futile resistance toward social and political structures. Lather (2003) best describes Deconstructivism as an ongoing process of examining contextual complications, inadequate categories, and perplexities. This Deconstructive stance provides a point of origin and nesting place for the other discursive theories that frame, inform, and guide the proposed research study and this researcher’s positionality.

Queering Education at the Intersections

An earlier section of this dissertation explores the use of the word “queer” and is designed to introduce the complicated meanings of the word. This section is intended to continue developing “queer” beyond an identity and explore Queer Theory as a theoretical method of inquiry and analysis. Poststructural and Feminist Theory both stimulate and critique Queer theory’s fluid and emergent position regarding identity, sexual orientation, and gender. Foucault’s (1990) view on dominant social structures framing the discourse of sexuality is often
interwoven in Queer Theory with Butler (2004), who argued against gender norms stemming from performative actions that develop from and further develop social and cultural identity entanglements. The lens of Queer Theory incites skepticism of the heteronormative, which pushes trans students into normalization within conservative and conforming educational institutions (Britzman, 1995; Coll & Charlton, 2018; Nemi Neto, 2018).

In educational research, Queer Theory has advanced beyond the identity politics of a particular place or time, choosing to explore potential reforms in policy, pedagogy, and curriculum (Carlin, 2011; Linville, 2017a; Lugg & Murphy, 2014). Topics concerning gender differences do, however, still face a culture of silence and avoidance within schools. Suggested reforms present LGBTQ inclusion as a multicultural approach based on understanding, disrupting, and negotiating heteronormativity (Murray, 2015). The term heteronormativity versus homophobia is presented to suggest that beyond irrational fear, school settings are a normalizing apparatus for institutionalized thinking that presents heterosexuality as a natural and virtuous phenomenon (Varney, 2001). The practice of normalization, assimilation, and labeling of LGBTQ in education justifies the application of Queer Theory and the need to separate transgender from normalized identity groupings that treat sexual orientation and gender identity synonymously.

Queering education at the intersections pairs Queer theory with Crenshaw’s Intersectionality Theory (1991) to examine how multiple dimensions of identity interconnect and are influenced by oppression and privilege in school. Erevelles and Minear’s (2010) narrative study of three economically disadvantaged, disabled, black individuals demonstrates the critical need for inter-categorical analysis and building alliance possibilities between other disciplines and intersectionality. Their research presents elements of individual identity categories that not
only intersect but constitute the whole social identity. This intersectionality application is furthered by Nuñez (2014), who explores Latino immigrant college access and provides a model that incorporates multilevel analysis of identity traits (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Nuñez’s Multilevel Model of Intersectionality

Figure 3. Reminiscent of an atom, this model of analysis seeks to conceptualize intersectionality across multiple social identities. Reprinted from “Employing multilevel intersectionality in educational research: Latino identities, contexts, and college access” by Anne Marie Nuñez (2014), Educational Researcher, 43(2), p.86.

Nuñez expands upon Abes et al.’s (2007) earlier intersectionality model that examined lesbian college students' perceptions of sexuality and the interaction within dimensions of identity, such as race, religion, social class, and gender. The implication of an atomic shape suggests that intersecting identities are a fundamental aspect of what constitutes the whole of a person’s identity. Nuñez’s model situates intersectionality within historicity to emphasize the totality of experience and the social contexts which shape and form identity. This model is used to enrich
understandings regarding the interaction of multiple identities and how they inform self-perception and meaning.

One criticism of intersectionality relates to the presumption that a series of categorical elements constitute an identity that represents fixed social constructions that do not involve personal choice (Carbado et al., 2013). Intersectionality, therefore, does not provide room for subjective and personal conceptions of individual agency. It also creates an either-or mentality founded in the opinion that intersectional analysis treats all differences as interchangeable and equivalent regardless of structural influences (Phoenix, 2006). A multi-level analysis places intersectionality within those power structures. Still, researchers must also make critical decisions regarding the most relevant intersections for a particular group as they relate to the identities explored, the setting, and time. The relationship between identity and agency does not discount the power of collective identities and social hierarchies. Identities are not fixed; they evolve and inform an internal sense of being mediated by agency in varied ways (Holland et al., 2001). Researchers must reconsider identity as mutually constructed through subjective and social constructs to provide a space that might reconcile the tensions between identity and agency. These tensions highlight an agency for trans students that lies in the freedom to exist both within and outside socially constructed labels. This dissertation utilizes theories and models within Queer and Intersectionality Theory to complement, challenge, and frame a narrative study of the experiences and agency of trans students. Students who simultaneously cross intersections of identity, culture, and power in high school settings.
Operationalization of Constructs: Defining Fluid Vocabularies

A list of frequently used terms and definitions is crucial in understanding how these concepts are used and applied within this study. These definitions acknowledge the constantly changing vocabularies within Queer research and scholarship.

AFAB

Assigned female at birth, also described as FtM (GLAAD, n.d.)

AMAB

Assigned male at birth, also described as MtF (GLAAD, n.d.)

Ally

An individual who is positioned within privileged social and cultural groups but works to become a part of social change and against oppression (GLSEN, 2015)

Gender Binary

Used to separate gender into the traditional and normative classifications of male and female (American Psychological Association, 2015)

Cisgender

Describes individuals whose gender identity and expression aligns with the sex assigned at birth (Human Rights Campaign, 2012)

Gender

Cultural associations, behaviors, and attitudes related to expectations of a person’s biological sex (American Psychological Association, 2015)

Gender Expression

The way an individual presents their physical appearance, voice inflection, gestures, and clothing choices (GLAAD, n.d.)

Gender Identity

An internal sense of gender (e.g., male, female, neither, both, etc.) may or may not match the sex assigned at birth and may not be visible to others (Human Rights Campaign, 2012)
Gender Passing

The perception by others as a particular identity/gender or cisgender, regardless of how the individual in question identifies, also described as blending or assimilating (PFLAG, 2017)

Heteronormative

A concept used to explain how culture and community institutionalize heterosexuality as the normative lifestyle (Murray, 2015)

Intersex

Used to describe a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive and/or sexual anatomy that does not seem to fit the medical classifications of female or male (GLSEN, 2015)

LGBTQ

Stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer this acronym is often used synonymously with other umbrella terms such as genderqueer, non-binary, non-normative, and gender non-conforming (Human Rights Campaign, 2012)

Queer

An inclusive term used to refer to both sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. This umbrella term, similar to the acronym LGBTQ is used to describe those that are gender non-conforming and identify beyond the heteronormative binary (Murray, 2015)

Sex

Used to describe an individual’s physical sex characteristics, e.g., male, female, intersex, etc. (American Psychological Association, 2015)

Sexual Orientation

Emotional, romantic, or sexual feelings toward another person; this can be experienced for those of the same or different gender; sexual activity does not necessarily define orientation or attraction (PFLAG, 2017)

Trans

Used as shorthand to describe both transgender and transsexual, a term typically associated with medical or hormonal interventions (GLAAD, n.d.)
Transgender

An adjective that describes a person’s gender identity that does not match their assigned sex at birth or transcends conventional expectations of gender identity or expression (PFLAG, 2017)

Transsexual

An older term that originated in the medical and psychological communities, preferred by some people who have permanently changed - or seek to change - their bodies through medical interventions, including but not limited to hormones and/or surgeries. Transsexual is not an umbrella term, and many transgender people do not identify as transsexual and prefer not to use this identifier (GLAAD, n.d.)

Plan of This Dissertation

Chapter one introduces researcher positionality and consciousness regarding discrepancies in educational practices on both the institutional and pedological level related explicitly to the trans student experience in high school. This chapter also presents the statement of the problem, research questions, theoretical framework, and essential terminology within the dissertation. Chapter two provides a literature review and explores existing research on LGBTQ and trans youth in educational settings. Chapter three is the methodology chapter. It explains participants, measures, and research design. Chapter four presents the findings and interpretation of this research based on each research question posed earlier in the study. The results section will also incorporate poetic transcription of participant narratives. This study concludes with chapter five, which provides a review of the findings, queer implications, recommendations for further research, and a poetic closing.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

In this chapter, a thorough review of the literature related to trans students will emphasize how a collective and individual identity is acknowledged and ignored in schools. The first section begins with significant civil rights legislation and the resulting policies that spark LGBTQ discourse in educational settings. From there, the focus shifts to the collective umbrella
of LGBTQ, a genre of academic literature that provides a majority of the existing knowledge surrounding trans youth. Analysis of the LGBTQ collective identity begins with a critique of research that perpetuates a damaging at-risk stereotype and then expands to review specific school reform areas. These include curriculum and the teacher, school climate, and extracurricular activities. The next area of interest highlights how existing literature builds upon the LGBTQ deficit model and portrays trans youth functioning within higher risk. This analysis continues with trans specific concerns over gendered spaces and bodies in schools. A discussion of the difficulties surrounding trans youth representation in educational research leads to beyond inclusion and queer possibilities, suggesting a future that affirms queer and trans student lives while embracing the tensions between collective and individual identity. This new discourse may also stimulate conversations concerning trans student activism and empowerment. The literature review concludes with queer alliances, an entry point for developing stakeholder partnerships despite the contradictions of a cisgender teacher positionality. The attached figure provides an organizational map highlighting chapter two's overall structure (see Figure 4).
Civil Right for LGBTQ Students

The functions of school extend beyond college and career readiness. Schools are microcosms of and preparation for the world. Bennett and LeCompte (1990) outlined four purposes of school: academic, political, economic, and social. These purposes serve both the individual and society as a whole, which are intertwined ideologically with a democratic philosophy (Dewey, 1903). The desire to establish American schools that reflect equality for marginalized students is more than sixty-five years in the making. Some consider the 1954 Supreme Court ruling in Brown versus the Board of Education as an event solely related to integrating black students in American schools. However, this hallmark case would address minority populations' equity concerns in educational settings for decades (Blanchett, Mumford,
and Beachum, 2005). Through Brown’s legacy, civil rights have been extended to protect marginalized populations, including LGBTQ youth.

**Legislation and Laws: An Impetus for Change**

It is essential to highlight that the federal government does not name or protect LGBTQ civil rights (Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972). Unlike other marginalized groups that are explicitly recognized, LGBTQ populations remain formally unacknowledged. (Seals & Gonzales, 2019). The US House of Representatives recently passed a bill to create LGBTQ provisions not directly stated in the 1964 Civil Rights Act through the 2019 *Equality Act* (Edmondson, 2019). If the *Equality Act*, which Congress passed on the anniversary of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, is also approved by the Senate, it becomes law. This law would not only prohibit bullying, but it would also codify trans student rights regarding locker rooms, restrooms, and pronoun usage (Blad, 2019; G safe, 2019; Seals & Gonzales, 2019). For schools and students, this act would clarify arguments and resolve court cases that have rested primarily on the interpretation of existing federal laws and protections that were not directly worded to include gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Education is often considered the primary concern of local authorities and not the federal government; however, federal mandates typically set the course for local action. Until the Senate confirms *The Equality Act*, LGBTQ students will remain shielded solely by a compendium of laws and policies that have been interpreted to provide specific safeguards (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Federal Protections of LGBTQ Student Populations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Federal Document</td>
<td>Interpreted Protection Provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amendment I: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the</td>
<td>Guarantees an LGBTQ student’s right to reveal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

Amendment XIV:
No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

Guarantees LGBTQ students equal protection from harassment.

The Equal Access Act of 1984:
Prohibits federally-funded public secondary schools which allow non-school-sponsored groups of students to meet from discriminating against any meeting of students on the basis of religious content if: (1) the meeting is voluntary and student-initiated; (2) there is no government sponsorship; and (3) no unlawful activity is permitted.

Ensures that extra-curricular clubs such as the Gay-Straight Alliance be allowed to form.

Title IX:
No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

Holds schools accountable for anti-harassment, anti-bullying, and the protection of LGBTQ students.

Note. Adapted from “Know Your Rights – Federal Laws Protecting GSAs and LGBTQ Students,” by G safe, 2019, Creating Safe Schools for LGBTQ+ Students.

Despite inconsistencies on the federal and state level, LGBTQ issues have become a more widespread topic in the country, especially after the historic gay marriage ruling (Kite & Bryant-Lees, 2016). This case helped to accelerate change for LGBTQ students by laying the groundwork for additional LGBTQ civil rights issues in schools.

Federal and State Mandates: Policy Changes and Conversations

*Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education* (1999) is considered the principal case that initiated Title IX use for LGBTQ students to sue school districts for failing to protect them. In this case, a mother filed suit and won in support of her daughter, whom another student had harassed. This ruling in favor of the student was the catalyst for Title IX’s use as an administrative enforcement tool that could directly address complaints of bullying related to gender expression and gender identity (Kimmel, 2006). In *Carver Middle School Gay-Straight Alliance v. School Board of Lake County, Florida* (2016), students were kept from organizing a
GSA by the local school board. Once again, under Title IX protections, the court upheld the student’s rights to organize and create the club as an extracurricular. These cases are two examples of numerous federal mandates that the US Supreme court has issued to reduce LGBTQ disparities in schools.

These Supreme Court rulings are intended to incite educational policy changes that include the development of local state laws and school district guidelines that are inclusive of LGBTQ students. According to the GLSEN National School Climate Survey (2017), enumerated nondiscrimination laws that specifically protect students based on sexual orientation and gender are currently enforced in nineteen states. In contrast, six states provide “No Promo Homo Laws,” laws that prohibit the discussion of LGBTQ topics and deny students access to LGBTQ curriculum, materials, or instruction (McGovern, 2012). These discriminatory laws are most often applied to sex education and include student-organized Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) and other subject areas (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. LGBTQ Student Protections by State

![Figure 5. Visual comparison of states with and without LGBTQ inclusive school laws, adapted from GLSEN Policy Maps 2019.](image)
Among these laws, some states like Alabama prohibit positive portrayals and further stipulate that LGBTQ representations of lifestyle are unacceptable and criminal (GLSEN, 2017). Although many of the more egregious laws have been ruled unconstitutional or are in the process of being repealed, educators are unsure of how to proceed. Especially when it relates to when and how gender and sexual orientation should be discussed in schools, this uncertainty further stigmatizes LGBTQ youth. Additional health risks associated with sexually transmitted diseases could also be pathologizing (Human Rights Campaign, 2018). Despite the hype surrounding Common Core and Next Generation claims regarding standardized goals, the fifty states are not united when it comes to educating students that identify outside of the heteronormative.

New York State’s (2010) *Dignity for All Students Act* (DASA) is a state-level example of constructive policy reform. This anti-harassment legislation includes sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in its protected categories. It establishes the expectation that schools will take action in the interest of investigating and intervening when bullying or harassment occurs. DASA is designed to prevent bullying and harassment and encourage positive climates in schools. This document is often heralded as a foundational policy in support of LGBTQ youth that is unique in its explicit and inclusive wording of the entire gender identity spectrum. DASA states:

No student shall be subjected to harassment or bullying by employees or students on school property or at a school function; nor shall any student be subjected to discrimination based on a person's actual or perceived race, color, weight, national origin, ethnic group, religion, religious practice, disability, sexual orientation, gender (including gender identity or expression), or sex by school employees or students on school property or at a school function. (p.1)

DASA’s anti-bullying policy is a significant part of LGBTQ student protections in New York State; however, some question its worth. DASA statistics regarding bullying incidents in New York schools have been regarded with suspicion due to the deficient number of incidents
reported (DiNapoli, 2017). While some might consider these small numbers as proof of efficacy, others forewarn too quickly, assuming fewer reports equal effective policy.

**The Umbrella of LGBTQ: School Reforms for a Collective Identity**

The collective identity of LGBTQ is meant to unite non-binary sexuality and gender-based groups. It is also intended to improve upon earlier use of the term “gay,” which activists argue did not accurately describe the diversity within the group it described (Barker & Scheele, 2016). In many ways, the umbrella of LGBTQ has functioned in schools as a double-edged sword. Favorable outcomes have included greater visibility and legitimacy for LGBTQ youth needs. Unfavorable outcomes resulting from the at-risk stereotype threat, while acknowledged, are often silenced by statistics that indicate a critical urgency for LGBTQ interventions.

**LGBTQ: The At-Risk Discourse**

LGBTQ student populations are often represented as at-risk or vulnerable. These archetypes of martyr, target, and victim began with Matthew Shepard's death and have become central to the way LGBTQ students see themselves (Rofes, 2004). The at-risk nomenclature results from multiple research studies that report harassment, bullying, and violence directly related to sexual orientation or gender identity (Kosciw et al., 2018; Merrin et al., 2018; Newcomb, 2012; Palmer et al., 2016). One of the most significant contributors to LGBTQ educational research is GLSEN’s National School Climate Survey, which began in 1999 and is released every two years. In its most recent survey results, GLSEN (2018) reports:

- 59.5% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 44.6% because of their gender expression, and 35.0% because of their gender.

- 34.8% of LGBTQ students missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.
• Approximately 4 in 10 students avoided gender-segregated spaces in school due to safety concerns (bathrooms: 42.7%; locker rooms: 40.6%).

• Most reported avoiding school functions (75.4%) and extracurricular activities (70.5%) because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

• The vast majority of LGBTQ students (87.3%) experienced harassment or assault based on personal characteristics, including sexual orientation, gender expression, gender, religion, race and ethnicity, and disability.

• 70.1% of LGBTQ students experienced verbal harassment (e.g., called names or threatened) at school based on sexual orientation, 59.1% based on gender expression, and 53.2% based on gender.

• 28.9% of LGBTQ students were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) in the past year based on sexual orientation, 24.4% based on gender expression, and 22.8% because based on gender.

• 12.4% of LGBTQ students were physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) in the past year based on sexual orientation, 11.2% based on gender expression, and 10.0% based on gender.

These findings are also reflected in the Centers for Disease Control’s (CDC) federally funded national study of LGBTQ youth issues. *Sexual Identity, Sex of Sexual Contacts, and Health-Related Behaviors Among Students in Grades 9-12 – United States and Selected Sites* describes with startling percentages LGBTQ students as victims of a significantly higher level of bullying, violence, and suicide in comparison to their peers. The CDC study's goal was to incite public health action, reduce the disparities between groups, and increase policy creation to protect LGBTQ youth (Kann et al., 2016). The CDC study also helped dispel claims of skewed data by privately funded institutions. Beyond the data, there exists a potential to stereotype LGBTQ as at-risk, which aligns students with a label that accentuates problematic characteristics or behaviors. Educators and researchers intended to use an at-risk classification to mitigate harmful practices and social inequalities; however, it has become a source of a social stigma that obscures
efforts to introduce school reform beyond bullying and violence. The at-risk label then creates a resulting emphasis on protective measures, particularly school safety.

**School Climate**

As part of improving school safety, many schools have resorted to security measures that consist of fortification of access points, ID badges, cameras, gates, security officers, and metal detectors (Bhatt and Davis, 2018). While safety and security are often used interchangeably, they are not synonymous. Security refers to barriers created to provide protection. This target hardening, intended to protect students by increasing security, may reduce feelings of safety among students and staff (Eklund et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2018). There are also concerns that danger is perceived as coming from outside of the school when common spaces such as hallways, cafeterias, locker rooms, etc., are similarly vulnerable (Oswald et al., 2005). Even when schools acknowledge bullying and harassment within the student body, discipline focuses on physical threats of violence or verbal assaults, ignoring the underlying climate of heterosexism and homophobia that creates additional safety threats (Payne & Smith, 2013; Short, 2017). School climate affairs must include proactive measures that support multiple levels of security and safety.

Additional aspects of school climate must address broader social and cultural contexts that contribute to the emotional threats influencing LGBTQ youth. The phrase safe space is one that is prevalent in early LGBTQ educational resources. Although it is often associated with a physical space such as a school library, safe spaces directly connect to the environment and opportunities for dialogue and expression (Aldridge et al., 2018; Lepp & Zorn, 2002; Gay-Milliken, 2020). Safe spaces are a subcomponent of school climate measures that serve as controllable preventative measures and interventions for absenteeism, misconduct, substance
abuse, bullying, and violence (Sulak, 2018). In 2005, GLSEN published *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America, A Survey of Students and Teachers*. Significant findings included hostile school climates and a high incidence of LGBTQ bullying and harassment. This study would contradict traditional bullying arguments as an inevitable rite of passage and instead force awareness of necessary LGBTQ student protections. Ten years later, GLSEN (2016) would revisit school climate, finding that LGBTQ students continued to report a high incidence of physical violence and bullying. However, this report would indicate that in schools with LGBTQ anti-bullying policies, GSAs, and LGBTQ teacher training, both students and teachers reported fewer incidents of discriminatory language and a gradually improving climate.

Large scale surveys like the GLSEN reports can establish patterns within the school community as a whole and, as a result, highlight statistical differences. However, individual narratives may indicate new interventions that can stimulate conversations regarding extrinsic and intrinsic factors of LGBTQ social inclusion in schools. One noteworthy study involved the *Beyond Bullying Project*, a private storytelling booth placed in high schools to explore LGBTQ stories of school life and social possibilities (Gilbert et al., 2018). In three US high schools, a total of 367 visits to the booth and 450 stories of both cisgender and LGBTQ participants (teachers and students) consistently revealed that LGBTQ topics do not solely involve labels of gender identity, sexual orientation, or violence. Instead, stories cross over and include complicated perspectives on race, immigrant status, religion, and American culture. These stories frame school climate as a space for issues that go beyond LGBTQ victimization and include the socio-ecological context of belonging through relationships with cisgender peers and teachers (Allen et al., 2016; Allen et al., 2018)

**Curriculum and the Teacher**
Research indicates that fostering supportive peer relationships reduces the risk of aggressive bullying and stimulates inclusive behavior (Roe, 2015; White et al., 2018). Another significant component of these relationships is leveraged by the curriculum covered in the classroom. Topics discussed during a lesson provide an opportunity to examine homophobic perceptions and heteronormative practice. Bias is often presented as an unintentional result of an individual’s failure to understand the subconscious stereotypes that exist in society (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Gender nonconformity is also misperceived by cisgender peers (Broussard & Warner, 2019). The heteronormative bias permeates every aspect of daily life and presents itself in deliberate and conscious ways. Property laws, tax returns, medical insurance claims, marriage, adoption, and countless other items are all part of a biased institutionalization that impacts many but is especially marginalizing for LGBTQ individuals. This influence can be witnessed in schools, where LGBTQ students often feel marginalized and isolated by heteronormative classroom practices that reinforce gender norms and gender inequality (Ullman, 2014).

LGBTQ inclusive sexual health education is one critical area of the school curriculum that is not available in all schools across the country, despite evidence that demonstrates LGBTQ topics reduce adverse physical and emotional health outcomes (Human Rights Campaign, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2017). In the United States, sex education approaches range from abstinence-only to comprehensive sexual education. Both styles emphasize physical and mental hygiene and the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases (Connell & Elliot, 2009; Conrey, 2012). The clear drawback of abstinence-only is that it reinforces heteronormative conceptualizations of marriage and procreation. It also further stigmatizes LGBTQ populations by attaching negatively associated health risks to existing stereotypes. While comprehensive sexual education may seem
more relevant, these programs are also focused on risk reduction and do not discuss feelings or desire (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Fine, 1988).

Compared to New York State, other states are less LGBTQ inclusive, limited, or non-compliant in their sex education policy and curriculum resources (GLSEN, 2017). However, two recent studies, the NYC Comptroller Report (2017) and The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS, 2017), both indicate that there are troubling inconsistencies in New York regarding health certified teachers and the inclusion of sexual violence, rape, or healthy relationships topics. The implications of inconsistent sexual education extend beyond health risks. A study of Dutch schools explored the relationship between sex education content and the level of LGBTQ name-calling or willingness to intervene (Baams et al., 2017). Unlike prior studies that stress the percentages of STDs within youth populations, this study suggests that a comprehensive sexual education curriculum provides opportunities to demystify and reduce LGBTQ prejudice and create positive LGBTQ conversation.

Ignoring or excluding LGBTQ topics is oppressive and discriminating, but this is not solely a result of sexual education. The implicit or hidden curriculum (Wren, 1999) extends beyond written texts, lesson plans, or unit objectives to include attitudes and ideals symbolized in social interactions. Concentrating on academic subject material as the primary emphasis and social contexts as an addendum perpetuates heteronormative and damaging discussion (Garett & Spano, 2017; Greteman A., 2017; Torres, 2001). Four states currently require an LGBTQ history curriculum; these include Illinois, California, New Jersey, and Colorado (Schwartz, 2019). In New York City, The Department of Education website states:

Curriculum is both a window and a mirror, allowing students who are not LGBTQ to see the experiences of others and providing a reflection for LGBTQ students. These efforts include incorporating LGBTQ history, reading books by LGBTQ authors, and ensuring
sexual health curriculum is inclusive of all identities. The NYC Department of Education has invested resources in the creation of LGBTQ affirming curriculum. (NYC Department of Education, 2019).

The curriculum links are to outside agencies, PBS and GLSEN. Both provide limited or generalized lesson plans that are meant to provide a sample but should not be used to constitute an entire curriculum plan. Once again, differences between states are intended to discourage practices that perpetuate LGBTQ exclusion or permit cisgender superiority; however, resources seem to be inconsistent or superficial.

Curriculum resources in science, especially in biology, are not particularly LGBTQ friendly. Biological differences are frequently presented in a heteronormative binary when covering, for example, chromosomal differences or human anatomy. Science courses also generally emphasize classification and labeling or identifying characteristics into generalized categories (Gunkel, 2009). Science teachers generally follow district guidelines regarding textbooks used within a course. These textbooks often propagate dominant cultural discourses and, as a result, present ideas through a heteronormative lens. One popular biology text published by McGraw Hill revealed that discussion of hormones, steroid use, reproductive anatomy, and physiology were presented in a heteronormative and binary ideology, and there were no references to homosexual or alternative sexualities (Bazzul & Sykes, 2011). While schools have responded to educational research by creating anti-bullying harassment laws, more attention needs to be given to the curriculum to discover where LGBTQ topics can be integrated. LGBTQ inclusive curriculum must be seen across subject areas and not just in sexual education or biology classrooms.

Humanities-focused subjects such as art, English, and social studies are most often referenced as easier to access when building an LGBTQ inclusive curriculum (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2015). In art classes, LGBTQ representation can be presented and explored
through visual art forms (Hsieh, 2016). Literary selections in English classrooms provide a moment for cisgender students to understand allyship, while LGBT students may also find community (Cramer, 2018). In Social Studies classrooms, teachers can infuse LGBTQ historical figures and civil rights topics throughout different periods while providing representation and identification opportunities. Through these stories, both lived and imagined, the curriculum creates opportunities to disrupt the heteronormative and create a counter-narrative (Helmer, 2016; Maguth & Taylor, 2014). However, teachers must discover ways to avoid marginalizing characters or individuals as parties that are a minority and therefore pitied.

Studies show that teacher training also makes a difference in handling subject matter related to gender and sexual orientation, which in turn helps to improve safety and feelings of belonging for LGBTQ youth (Gorski et al., 2013; Greytak et al., 2013; Shelton, 2019; Wolowic et al., 2018). Despite this, archived research gathers dust, and the data rarely seems to be incorporated into teacher professional development (TPD) or make a difference in the classroom. One version of TPD resides in building a knowledge base that stems from practitioner experience (Hiebert et al., 2002). This model encourages movement away from activist/expert-driven learning models that take place outside of schools toward educator-to-educator models inside schools (Payne & Smith, 2011). Teachers often resent being told about best practices by those who have never spent time in the classroom. Instead, research by teacher practitioners may provide more practical suggestions or, at the very least, be informed by educator voices. Pennell (2017) provides exercises that can be used to train secondary educators; for example, through a scavenger hunt, teachers examine heteronormativity and sexism (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Heteronormative Scavenger Hunt Examples*
**Heteronormative Examples** | **LGBTQ-Affirmative Examples**
---|---
Posters for dances only depict heterosexual couples | Posters for dances with heterosexual and LGBTQ couples
Only gender-segregated restrooms | Gender-neutral restrooms
Personal pictures displayed in classrooms or office spaces are only of heterosexual couples and families | Personal pictures displayed in classrooms or office spaces include LGBTQ couples and families

Homecoming King or Queen | Safe Space stickers

*Note. Adapted from* Training Secondary Teachers to Support LGBTQ+ Students: Practical Applications from Theory and Research by Summer Melody Pennell.

Statistical information has significance, but Pennell argues that activities like asking teachers to find examples of LGBTQ-affirmative and heteronormative displays in the school building provide opportunities for teachers to see the broader implications of heterosexism. Like students, teachers have a limited attention span for learning modes that rely on lectures and data. These intervention strategies are intended to force teachers to think beyond the statistics detailing LGBTQ victimization. Proactive measures, critical thinking, and teacher practices are not readily apparent, resulting in superficial and ineffective changes.

Another TPD model, presented by Case and Meier (2014), reports that educators are more likely to display ally behaviors when teacher training workshops consist of smaller groups that can practice real-life school setting scenarios (see Table 3).

**Table 3**

*LGBTQ Training Vignettes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>What would you do?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>You overhear trans-negative comments or verbal harassment based on gender nonconformity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>You overhear questions about a gender-nonconforming student (targeted student not present).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Teen students ask a visibly gender-nonconforming student questions that make the student uncomfortable.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You attempt to separate students into girls and boys, and a student informs you that they feel like neither.


These scenarios are given to small groups to role play and discuss. Facilitators then provide opportunities for whole group discussion and questions. The physical engagement creates a moment for educators to consider their reactions and the responses of others. Case and Meier also stress the importance of direct access to experts and time to engage in reading research-based support materials. Another study of pre-service teachers describes similar training in two distinct phases, over an extended time. Findings indicated that such training should be a mandatory requirement for teacher certification (Kearns et al., 2014).

Teachers must engage in LGBTQ training as students themselves to become allies inside and outside of the classroom. Both TPD models rely heavily on physical cues and mock scenarios to develop the teacher’s role as an LGBTQ ally. While there are established gaps in both pre-service and in-service LGBTQ teacher training, these models remain teacher-centered. Participatory action research (PAR) is one method that might provide a means to involve both teachers and students in discovering alternate ways of approaching LGBTQ inequities in schools. Tiffany Dejaynes (2019) outlines a semester-long examination by students, allies, and teachers into how inclusion and exclusion spaces develop in schools. The partnership of school-based stakeholders within school and community working in tandem to research and discuss issues showcases a professional learning model that may mitigate weaknesses within other TPD types. A school-oriented or teacher-oriented approach limits opportunities to develop critical intersectional relationships between school and community (Robinson et al., 2016; Wymer & Fulford, 2019). Instead, educators reinforce an incomplete understanding of LGBTQ students who should be involved and engaged in the process.
Extracurriculars: LGBTQ Student Engagement Outside of the Classroom

LGBTQ youth participation in extracurricular activities provides another layer in school reforms meant to improve self-esteem and belongingness. These can serve as pathways connecting LGBTQ students to supportive social networks (Allen et al., 2016; Boyer et al., 2018; Wolowic et al., 2018). For example, athletic sports programs offer access to peer interaction and the potential to build social capital (Landi, 2018). Unfortunately, despite additional physical and mental health benefits, some research suggests that for LGBTQ youth, gender norms within team-based sports often create increased opportunities for both verbal and physical attacks (GLSEN, 2013; Lehman, 2016). LGBTQ students explain that the pressure of demonstrating acceptable norms of masculine or feminine behavior and possible alienation often discourages their participation. The Human Rights Campaign (2017) reports that 24% of LGBTQ students participate in team sports and that 80% of those same students do not feel comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation with their coaches or teammates. The barriers to LGBTQ youth participation in sports are substantial; however, other extra-curricular activities demonstrate increased support resource potential.

According to GLSEN (2007), a GSA's presence provides a positive impact on school climate. These findings emphasize benefits, including sending messages that harassment and bias will not be tolerated, increasing LGBTQ engagement across school spaces, and providing access to supportive staff and peers. GSAs are further supported by studies that demonstrate positive LGBTQ youth development and enhanced safety, benefits both the academic and social functions of school (Heck et al., 2011; McCormick et al., 2014). Beyond friendship, general engagement, and identity-specific discussions, GSAs are a school setting positioned to create opportunities for students to self-advocate and address equity issues (Chong et al., 2018). GSAs
are specifically targeted to support gender and sexual identity issues. However, other LGBTQ student engagement opportunities cater to varied aspects of life and are not gender or sex-based, such as theater arts, marching band, school publications, student government, etc.

The call for studying LGBTQ student issues outside of existing negative stereotypes is echoed in educational journals that have begun to explore resilience, empowerment, and a more in-depth examination of the role of family relationships, youth development programs (outside of GSAs), activism, religion, and work (Horn & Russell, 2009; Katz-Wise & Thomson, 2017; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017). Each of these factors has traditionally been studied under an assumed standard of negativity or lack of support, which creates the potential to further marginalize by solely defining LGBTQ schoolchildren as at-risk (Aragon et al., 2014). If discourses exclusively identify LGBTQ students as victims and disregard opportunities to discover other voices, a self-fulfilling prophecy of victimization may perpetuate existing problems. Additionally, basing research within an at-risk framework is faulty because it does not acknowledge diversity among LGBTQ youth and assumes a singular identity.

Separating the “T”: Transgender Specific Concerns

Trans youth often remain in the umbra of the LGBTQ umbrella, where distinctions are consistently underrepresented or combined with other non-binary identities. For trans students, high school can involve a complicated series of personal, social, and medical transitions that require both validation and support. Trans student research is often situated within studies of risk factors.

Higher Risk: Mental and Physical Health Factors

In July of 2015, the New York State Board of Education released Guidance to School Districts for Creating a Safe and Supportive School Environment for Transgender and Gender
Nonconforming Students. This document was the first state policy document to address Trans youth needs specifically. It provides guidance for local school districts to comply with federal laws outlined by Schools in Transition (Orr et al., 2015), a national report highlighting federal regulations and legal implications regarding trans specific concerns. Both documents respond to the alarming rates of trans students who experience more significant verbal and physical assault than LGB and cisgender peers. (Greytak et al., 2009; Johns et al., 2019). Studies confirm these fears reporting 75-80 percent of trans students report feeling unsafe in school (NCTE, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2018; Center for Disease Control, 2018). The discourse surrounding suicide and transgender mental health concerns has helped garner support for trans student needs worldwide (Bryan, 2017; Wilson & Cariola, 2020).

In the United States, elevated levels of poverty, unemployment, arrest, substance abuse, violence, suicide, and homelessness are widely reported and applied to transgender populations (Grant et al., 2010). These trends are also found within student populations with even more alarming rates for FtM and trans youth of color (Hatchel et al., 2018; Ignatavicius, 2013). These two groups face additional stress factors that extend beyond the experiences of their peers who do not have to deal with racism and transphobia. In California, which is considered one of the most progressive states regarding LGBTQ school policy, trans students are more than 2.8 times likely to abuse tobacco, drugs, and alcohol as coping and avoidance mechanisms (De Pedro et al., 2017). Reducing trans youth mortality involves implementing proactive measures to alleviate absenteeism, substance abuse, and other risk factors (Day et al., 2018).

One suggested policy concerning trans youth emphasizes name and pronoun protocol (New York State Education Department, 2015; Orr et al., 2015). Trans students often choose to adopt either a gender-neutral name that does not suggest a particular gender or a name that
corresponds with their gender identity. New York State Education Law 2d protects the ability to change a trans student’s name on school paperwork within the school; all documents required by law regarding birth name must be kept confidential and in a separate file. Schools may not disclose this information to parents or any other parties without student consent (New York State Education Department, 2015). Corresponding preferred gender pronouns are often problematic due to the accepted centuries-old conventions of the English language that dictate binary pronouns associated with the heteronormative use of “he/she” or “his/her.” These heteronormative language choices ultimately contribute to students’ perceptions of homophobia and exclusion (Pascoe, 2013). Accepting and adapting gendered pronouns can reduce stigma and improve transphobic, homophobic, and heteronormative attitudes and beliefs of non-binary peers (Horn & Romeo, 2010; Roe, 2015; Kosciw et al., 2018). The process of preferred name and pronoun is an essential aspect of social transitioning and acceptance.

Other aspects of transitioning contribute to higher risk considerations, especially risks associated with mental health. Trans youth experience a conflict between their gender identity and their gender assigned at birth (Gill-Peterson, 2018). Transitioning to begin living as themselves is often a complicated period of self-realization and coming to terms with societal expectations. While name changes and gender expression are important trans topics, there must be more conversation regarding gender dysphoria and the psychological or physical issues that impact trans students. Often educators misunderstand gender expression or gender variance in relation to sexual orientation (De Jong, 2014). This conflation of gender and sex contributes to feelings of isolation that may already be felt outside of school. Parental support is often another issue. For most trans students, the anxiety and depression caused by dysphoria are critically intensified by waiting until they are eighteen to medically transition without parental consent.
(Janicka & Forcier, 2016; Miller et al., 2018; Radix & Silva, 2014). These issues may or may not resolve during high school, but they also must not be exacerbated by debates over bathrooms in schools.

**Beyond Bathrooms: Gendered Spaces and Bodies**

Recent Supreme Court cases involving trans high school students have received a large amount of media attention, creating conversations about gendered spaces and bodies in schools. The 2018 Supreme court ruling in favor of Gavin Grim (*Gavin Grimm v. Gloucester County School Board*) is often cited as a critical case for trans student civil rights (Corbat, 2017). A second case from the same year, *Adams v. The School Board of St. Johns County, Florida*, also ruled in favor of a student’s right to use the bathroom that corresponds with their gender identity. Although not settled prior to each student’s graduation, both cases provide a legal precedent that pushes schools to reform local policies and address bathroom policies in schools. Additionally, these cases forced school districts to look beyond bathrooms to other gendered spaces. These often typically include locker rooms, gymnasiums, weight rooms, athletic fields, and anything sports-related.

Historically, sports in schools have been viewed from the constructs of power and participation (Block, 2014). Caudwell (2014) describes trans sports participation in relation to the complexities of being non-binary in a cisgender environment that also assumes a precise alignment of LGBTQ or that transgender is a fixed category. Caudwell’s research initially included LGBTQ student focus groups and a wider lens of exploring sports participation among gender and sexually marginalized groups as a whole. From this, two male-identifying students' narratives highlighted specific trans-specific issues concerning uniforms and the methodological flaws of umbrella groupings. Even though the two students expressed very different high school
sports experiences, both athletes expressed similar fears surrounding the acceptance of cisgender peers concerning gender-based ability or strength.

For some, trans youth participation in sports creates an unfair advantage based on the perceived gendered benefits of weight, height, or muscle mass (Mahoney et al., 2015; Cunningham & Pickett, 2018). In June of 2019, Selina Soule and two other unnamed Connecticut students, who participate in high school track, filed Title IX discrimination charges, arguing that trans female athletes are advantaged to earn potential scholarships and higher placements. For these cisgender athletes, this lawsuit was meant to ensure fairness and create a level playing field. For the trans athlete, this was an attack on her very being and the authenticity of her gender identity. In the adult world, similar debates over transgender athletes in track have emphasized required hormone levels for participation (Longman & Macur, 2019). This practice creates the artifice of a verification process, where a set level of hormones confirms gender identity. An action that is predicated on inconsistent proof of physiological benefits that can vary based on many factors (Reeser, 2005). For centuries scientists have sought to explain sex differences through brain structure or size, hormones, and MRI mapping (Joel et al., 2015). These claims further a discussion that overstates physical bodies instead of the underlying assumptions and prejudices that justify oppressive treatment.

The threats of exclusion, teasing, and brutality hinder trans student participation in sports. Limited engagement acknowledges only one part of the problem regarding high school athletic programs and gendered spaces. Trans athletes and locker room access are primarily linked to arguments surrounding the controversies of bathroom use instead of the voices of trans athletes (Sperling, 2020). Gender-neutral bathrooms that can also serve as dressing rooms are intended to resolve conflicts but may also serve as another opportunity for trans students to be targeted,
bullied, or excluded by others. The presence of gender-inclusive bathrooms is a physical indicator of equity (Chaney & Sanchez, 2018; Fischer et al., 2008; Perry-Sheldon, 2018).

Jennifer Ingrey (2018) supports this in her analysis of a school washroom policy that dictates a single-stall, gender-neutral bathroom be provided in addition to existing gendered bathrooms. Ingrey documents two students' experiences, one trans and the other genderqueer, who express high school as a period of difficulty negotiating and recognizing their feelings of gender identity. Both participants stress heightened fears of being outed and the desire to pass depending on bathroom selection. Trans students should be able to use the bathroom or space that corresponds to their gender identity. Creating a gender-neutral bathroom that metaphorically and literally neutralizes gender or establishes a gender-less space could create more problems. These examples reveal the significance of trans student input to avoid additive and ineffective change.

**Representation: Who is Telling “Their” Story? Where can “They” be found?**

In comparison to their cisgender peers, trans students are grossly underrepresented. Data collection methods that rely on national or statewide surveys do not include questions regarding gender identity, and therefore, trans and other non-binary students are not explicitly discussed (Westbrook & Saperstein, 2015). Within academic research, trans student narratives of high school are difficult to find or describe college-age students. Narrative accounts from the teacher, social worker, guidance counselor, and administrator working with trans student populations are readily available. There are also resources that pool narratives within studies listed as non-binary, queer, or LGBTQ. These collective groupings should not extend to studies that are intended to very specifically highlight diversity and individual experience. The limited number of trans student narratives may result from the fact that high school students are predominantly minors who require special protections under ethical review boards. Also, there is the
misperception that transgender identities mean medical transitions, which typically does not occur until after age 18.

The handful of works related to trans students in high school settings reveals surprising diversity. As discussed earlier, Jayne Caudwell (2014) explores trans high school athlete experiences. Two young men’s narratives present important questions regarding society’s gendering of sports and harmful misconceptions about gender authenticity. Unlike the students in Cauldwell’s research, James's schooling experiences (Bartone 2018) reveal conscious choices to remain hidden within a socially accepted stereotype of a tomboy while struggling to balance an identity without a name. Jeananne Nichols (2013) shares Rie’s story beyond the birthname of Ryan. This narrative juxtaposes one trans student’s experiences: a hostile school environment, a treasured music program, a supportive family, and, eventually, the decision to homeschool. Rie’s identity and name selection journey is echoed in another study by Julia Sinclair-Palm (2017). Sinclair-Palm shares Tye’s graduation story in which the hauntings of a given name on a slip of paper create questions that threaten years of important social and personal transitioning. These studies develop similar factors provided by the executive summaries included in GLSEN’s National Climate Survey. However, the use of narratives provides an essential glimpse into social contexts and provide tools to reflect and question educational policy and practice.

Riggs and Bartholomaeus (2018) explain that additional narratives of trans youth reside outside academic research. Their study utilized YouTube uploads of transgender teens, videos that reflect a culture centered around media production and social networking. Through their examination of student narratives, five themes developed. These include: (1) the failings of sex education, which leaves trans youth unprepared for intimacy or relationships, (2) fears of fetishism by others, (3) negotiating dysphoria, (4) re-gendering bodies physically, and (5) finding
affirming relationships. While earlier LGBTQ research often references the broad requirement of trans-inclusive topics in sex ed. curriculum, there is minimal specificity regarding content. The implications of Riggs and Bartholomeus’s work primarily highlights the reality of absent trans youth informational needs in traditional educational spaces and the need to find that information online. This study is significant because it reiterates the established sexual education gap and reveals existing sources that can supplement statistical data. These resources should not be discounted under the guise of scientific rigor.

For example, Kuklin’s (2014) *Beyond Magenta: Transgender Teens Speak Out* is a non-fiction book that documents the narratives of six trans and gender non-conforming teenagers. It was initially reported as one of the ten most frequently banned or challenged books by the American Library Association in 2015. A fact that helped increase interest in the book. Kuklin’s text is currently incorporated as a high-quality resource for teachers and teacher trainers who need exposure to real-life examples of trans student issues (Bail & Craig, 2017; Heagney, 2016; Pennell, 2017). Popular podcasts provide access to trans student experiences, as well. National Public Radio (NPR) named Stellan Petto’s “What’s It Like Being Trans?” as a finalist in the student podcast challenge (Zimmerman, 2019). Stellan, a sixth-grader from Louisville, was one of more than 250,000 students to submit entries as a part of a school project. Her podcast is an example of untapped resources that help explore the complicated aspects and layers of a trans student who consists and is shaped by many intersecting identities and an equally endless number of contexts.

**Beyond Inclusion: Affirming Queer and Trans Youth**

Despite the pejorative history of the word queer, its use among young people is indicative of the desire not to define themselves by gender. Wunderman Thompson, a global advertising
and digital marketing company, reports that fifty-three percent of individuals ages 13-20 years old know someone using gender-neutral pronouns (Laughlin, 2016). The results of a recent study indicate that queer-identified individuals are a sizable group, reflecting almost 6% of the LGBTQ population (Goldberg et al., 2019). The use of queer as a reaction to the Stonewall Riots was a demand for equal rights in the phrasing, “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it” (Barker & Scheele, 2016). Over half a century later, educational research of students outside of the heteronormative must go beyond inclusion to affirm and empower.

**Queer Possibilities: A Future that Embraces the Whole**

The dual umbrellas of LGBTQ and transgender have illustrated the difficulties of labeling groups to explore shared experiences. Queer then might also be considered to share a similar ironic existence because of its history and use. The failings of language to accurately express meaning reside in a continual struggle of context and connotation. While queer is used as a collective identity term, its purpose in Queer Theory does not divorce gender and sexual orientation from the intersections of other cultural identities. Queer Studies are meant to encourage questioning cultural assumptions and categories that perpetuate a monolithic and privileged cultural lens of knowing (Greteman, 2017a). Conversations about cultural identities in schools initially corresponded with steadily increasing numbers of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations. With an influx of student diversity, educators must consider multicultural education, culturally responsive schools, and culturally competent pedagogy (Villenagas & Lucas, 2002). These interventions often revolve around student ethnicity or race. There are, however, many other aspects of culture that are both subjective and objective, most of which, like an iceberg, can only be partially seen (Hall, 1976).
When applied to trans youth, this iceberg metaphor forces educators to understand that building cultural competency requires more than a superficial gaze at what can be seen and a consideration of the many cultures that comprise student identity. Intersectionality originates in the study of violence against women of color, where the overlap of race and gender is often overlooked, especially in early feminist and anti-racist research (Crenshaw, 1991). Over time, queer theorists adopted intersectionality to disrupt heteronormative labeling and stereotyping that misguides educational policy (Barry & Drak, 2019; Denton, 2016; Mayo, 2007). Queer theory and intersectionality are also a way of looking at identity and the complicated contextual intersections that create normative and counter normative behavior. For LGBTQ youth of color, disregarding intersectionality creates a paradox of community and culture that concurrently excludes “other” identities at both the individual and social levels (McGuire, 2017; Kumashiro, 2001). Marginality for trans youth is complicated not only by gender and sexual orientation but also by many other identity factors such as religion, socio-economic status, etc. Trans youth exist in a transitional period of life between child and adult (Talburt, 2004). The many social and biological changes that occur in puberty often heighten this transitory existence. Multi-level intersections of identity must not be ranked, prioritized, or placed within a chronology but must be considered simultaneously.

Trans students are uniquely situated across both literal and philosophical intersections that create both tension and contradiction. Kumashiro (2002) re-presents the words of queer activist educators who belong, live, and work with and within the intersections of race and culture. Drawing from the literary technique of juxtaposition, Kumashiro joins these stories in the hopes of simultaneously engaging similarity, difference, complexity, and paradox. The experiences of Beth, an Asian American transgender female, are a struggle for Kumashiro to
narrate, and he is transparent about how his own identity as a homosexual Asian male both informed and confused his efforts. Ultimately, Kumashiro criticizes those who look for a panacea and cultivates juxtaposition as an activist means to encourage the troubling of education. In what ways can educators be willing to struggle with their inadequacies, be transparent about their failures, share with their colleagues, admit their troubles with education? While many have drawn attention to troubling statistics, perhaps the more significant worry is how to empower educators and students willing to question the traditional frameworks of teaching and learning.

The looming shadow of LGBTQ at-risk and transgender at higher risk is recognized as problematic and has prompted resiliency studies. Studies have redefined the terms and ideas used to describe and discuss trans youth from a strengths-based perspective (Kavanagh, 2016; Watson & Veale, 2018; Shelton et al., 2018; Singh, 2013; Singh et al., 2014). Despite this improvement, strength is attached to surviving and negotiating hostile and oppressive school environments or based on heteronormative assumptions. An over-emphasis on resilience could lead to centering in adversity. Programs that use social justice frameworks have been suggested to promote trans youth empowerment by providing opportunities for students to be involved in creating equity within the systems surrounding them (Burkholder, 2020; Wagaman, 2016). These programs are promising, but they exist outside of school or are narrowly incorporated into GSAs or stand-alone workshops and conferences. The current state of research regarding trans students presents unavoidable negative entanglements and limitations. More needs to be done to discover themes that provide an expanded understanding and representation of trans youth and hope for future possibilities.

**Queer Alliances: What a Teacher Can[not] Do**
At a five-hour training session designed for social workers, youth counselors, and volunteers, I participated in a trust-building activity intended to force participants to engage and re-engage in stereotypes. The group consisted of predominately non-white racial backgrounds; only two out of the twenty workshop participants were Caucasian. As both cisgender and straight, I stood out amongst the LGBTQ people in the room. A ten to fifteen-year age gap left me the oldest in the room as well. I was warmly welcomed with smiles and curiosity, despite my differences. Around the room were cards labeled: race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, socio-economic status, ability, and age. These terms appeared to be ones that would be highly personal for such a diverse group that, like myself, understood aspects of belonging to a marginalized population. As the facilitator asked a series of questions, we moved to the card that best answered each question.

Then members took turns sharing their reasons for standing next to each sign. It was, surprisingly, a very personal and frightening experience. *What label have you felt most judged by? What label have you felt the most pride in? What label has brought you the most shame?* At the last question, I stood alone by gender. The people around me shared their stories, and I became more and more uncomfortable. The other participants presented a metaphorical and literal rainbow of culture, race, gender, and sexual orientation, and I was humbled by their willingness to share raw and personal experiences. I remained silent, moving from sign to sign, but their growing curiosity was unavoidable, despite my attempts to divert my eyes to the clock in the corner of the room. Time was not my friend, and with each passing minute, my worry grew, a fear that my response might insult another and a hope that I might avoid participation.

My turn came, and with a deep, shaky breath, glassy eyes, and a froggy throat, I said, “I’m ashamed of my gender and my cis-privilege, and I’m so afraid of being that stereotypical
suburban ‘woke’ teacher, and I work in a system that needs so much work, and I’m complicit, and I’m just so much more emotional than I should be.” I know I rambled on for what felt like an eternity, and it was one really, really long run-on. Thankfully, I was surrounded by kindness. Everyone smiled, some nodded as I spoke, called out that they wished teachers like me were around when they were in school, and a few even thanked me. I still felt ridiculous. At the end of the night, the program director sought me out. She wanted me to know that she trusted me, felt my sincerity, and looked forward to our continued work.

I should mention that the training is for a non-profit organization that promotes positive youth development for LGBTQ youth with programs dedicated to health, wellness, and cultural competency. Over the past eight months, I have volunteered as a chaperone at teen socials and game nights. This confessional is not meant to be cathartic, nor is it intended to provide some literary denouement. I still hold that shame I felt that night uncomfortably within me. Even writing about it makes me feel lame. Despite worrying about how my intentions might be judged, I write this admitting that despite my fears of perpetuating deficit thinking, the lens and influence of a white patriarchal and privileged has been metaphorically knocked off my head. While I know that that lens distorts and dictates many aspects of my life, I refuse to surrender to it. In attempting to answer the call for trans-affirming action, I look for a path that provides a space where I might deconstruct and disrupt the labels that limit my ability.

How does a heterosexual, cisgender teacher use Queer Theory to explore high school narratives of trans students? Is it enough to be well-intentioned? Is it enough to do the research? Is it enough to spend time in “the field”? Is it enough to be reflexive? This is what I have come to realize I can[not] do. As a young English major, a taskmaster, and later treasured mentor, Dr. Julia Walker taught me that parentheses were intended in MLA citation to provide essential
descriptive information and should not include the musings or afterthoughts of an undergraduate mind. However, she also showed me the British tradition of brackets to clarify writing between the source and writer. I use these brackets to clarify or acknowledge my position's duality, one that makes it difficult for me to resolve contradictions and tensions. I can, should, and will seek to align myself with others who are actively working within the spaces that this research has guided me toward. This unexpected discovery of intersectional spaces that bridge community, school, teacher, student, college student, parent, and ally created a professional learning model and research resource in progress. Of course, “queer” must be respected for its history and should not be appropriated. Still, perhaps queer alliances may evolve to include the cisgender teacher-researcher-practioner who will work in solidarity to empower and encourage change agents.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Despite the nascent section of research available that attempts to address trans experiences beyond a deficit model or the LGBTQ framework, trans high school students continue to be grouped within umbrella categories. As a result, there remains the potential to overlook or overgeneralize transgender-specific subjects related to gender, gender expression, sexual orientation, and social or medical transitioning.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore trans experiences of high school, specifically examining the relationships between student identity, agency, and the influence of school functions. This examination is situated within and relies upon the following research questions to provide focal points throughout the entire research process.

- How do trans people narrate their retrospective accounts of the high school experience?
What do the retrospective high school narratives of trans people reveal about the relationships and influences of identity, agency, and school function?

Defining Purpose through Subjectivity

This dissertation topic was initially developed from the self-centered perspective of personal growth and the shame of ignorance regarding LGBTQ student needs. Improving teacher professional development meant investigating teacher perspectives. Other teachers would be easier to collaborate with due to shared understandings of the professional and personal obstacles involved in creating more gender-inclusive classrooms. One significant repercussion of this approach is that it did not recognize the voices of the students who could speak directly with firsthand experience of existing exclusionary practice. The cost of such a naïve standpoint ignored a complicit role within the dominant heteronormative culture and practices that contribute to the oppression of trans youth (Tuck, 2009). Despite a Safe Space sticker on the classroom door and the rainbow lanyard that holds a school identification badge, I had not dealt with the tensions and contradictions of my personal and professional position (Pillow, 2003). Prioritizing teacher professional development and teacher perceptions would perpetuate a limiting and pre-existing research framework within a heteronormative cisgender centric mindset.

Teacher thinking and teacher perceptions dominate conversations about education. The Danielson rubric's immense popularity is largely responsible for the current emphasis that presents reflection as a fundamental instrument in determining effective teaching and improving student trajectories. Two established teacher evaluation frameworks used in the United States, the Danielson rubric and the National Board Teaching Certification, specifically include teacher reflection as an integral aspect of teacher efficacy (Viviano, 2012). By incorporating teacher thinking as a criterion in high stakes performance evaluations, the logical result is an influx of
research on the topic of teacher beliefs. The danger of a singular focus on teacher perceptions without interrogating teacher positionalities can lead to faulty conclusions and a misunderstanding of complex situations. This type of problem-solving perpetuates a two-dimensional thinking process categorized by what something is or is not. Any superficial probing of teacher thinking alone enables a dichotomy that shapes binary understanding and limits the potential to discover other valuable insights (Yero, 2010). Some argue that engaging in an examination of teacher dispositions yields important information surrounding teacher behavior or willingness to teach LGBTQ topics (Murray, 2015). Frohard-Dourlent (2018) explored the ways educators articulate the need to include trans student input in decisions made addressing needs. Despite this potential, a teacher-centered study provides a partial view toward the goals of anti-oppressive and equitable education for gender-expansive youth.

Relying on predominately cisgender female teachers' experiences to understand trans student needs would mean looking for awareness within a pool of participants whose practices and lives paralleled my own. Laura Nader (1972) criticized studying down, disregarding power dynamics, and the implications of privilege. Using early ethnographic study as evidence, Nader found fault in anthropologists who researched natives to aid their colonial government employer. However, researching teacher experiences as a teacher or studying sideways would not resolve issues surrounding disempowerment. Changing participants to acknowledge subjectivity and oppression does not necessarily guarantee a more ethical dissertation. Power and privilege do not move in set cardinal directions. The fear of studying from or toward the wrong direction was a distraction from realizing that positivist thinking had crept into my process (Hannerz, 2010). Participant selection had become an attempt to negate researcher subjectivity. This realization
furthered a growing self-consciousness that demanded incorporating and owning subjectivity to extend and direct the research.

**Research Design**

The qualitative design of this dissertation is narrative. This choice probably seems obvious; I teach stories. Nevertheless, to frame narrative research or participant experiences as stories would be a gross misrepresentation, although the two are often used synonymously.

**The Narrative Approach**

There are many forms of narrative research; in its most basic form, narratives are drawn from participant experiences (Creswell, 2002). The narrative model was initially described as data provided in the unit of a story, and Labov (1967) provided specific terms to outline significant life events as plot events, such as abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. While these archetypal structures of analysis will be considered, there are additional features of engaging in narrative inquiry that have developed over time. Another aspect of the narrative approach is the concept of truthfulness.

Retrospective accounts are a process of looking back at past experiences, and memory is often considered unreliable (Wengraf, 2001). However, in narrative inquiry, retrospective understandings are a researcher’s means to examine individual and subjective conceptions of self and identity. Reissman (1993) explains that the narrative researcher must wrestle with and locate their own story within the context of the life stories that will be represented. Other researchers suggest that the multiplicity of researcher identities creates both insider and outsider conflicts, and potential damage must be mitigated through a transparent positionality and continual reflexivity (Collins, 1999; Pillow, 2003; Tuck, 2009; Villenas, 1996).
Brockenbrough specifically (2011) describes this negotiation of self in his identity as a gay, African American researcher and educator. His study of LGBTQ educators reveals how aspects of the researcher identity can cross over, complicate, and help develop participant feelings of trustworthiness. Brockenbrough felt that his identity as a black queer man made him more sensitive and more likely to abandon specific questions, despite knowing as a researcher that this would produce a variable data set. Rhee and Subedi (2014) also explore the challenges of researching participants that belong to a shared culture but embody differences of identity regarding language, gender, sexual orientation, and social class. They suggest an “in-between” where participant and researcher identities intersect, and differences provide an opportunity for the researcher to critically and continually reexamine practice. This concept transfers to this study, where trans students differ in sexual orientation, sexual expression, and gender identity. Both studies suggest the importance of acknowledging these differences and how this may influence the dynamics between this researcher and participants during the interview or in later stages of the research analysis.

It is essential also to reference that narrative inquiry, unlike other research options that utilize narratives, very specifically, is a collaboration between the researcher and participant to understand the social, cultural, and institutional alongside the individual experience. The work of Clandinin (2013) contributes to a mutable model of narrative inquiry. Traditions, such as the use of field texts, are still present. The field itself has shifted and is formed after unpacking and engaging within and in tandem with participant narratives' contextual nuances. Clandinin’s use of the phrase relational research emphasizes the complex goals of establishing relationship-based experiences. Overall, these researchers do not map out a singular, detailed narrative path to
follow; however, they serve as practical models using different mechanics to resolve challenges and tensions that may surface.

**Participants and Setting**

The goal of this study was to recruit five participants via purposive sampling. The strategy for selection was based on the following (a) participants identify as trans; (b) participants are recent high school graduates over the age of 18; (c) participants attended suburban high schools in New York. There were no other participation restrictions, and I anticipated a diverse sample representing multiple identity factors. Due to the sensitive nature of topics related to gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression, there was a concern that it would be challenging to access participants; however, this was not an issue. In terms of sample size, the goal of five total participants was based on the concept of obtaining information-rich narratives. Narrative design does not necessitate larger numbers in sample size. Instead, the density of the data or information collected by each participant is emphasized (Creswell, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Saldana & Omasta, 2017). While the desired number of participants was met, other intersectional identity factors, such as race and ethnicity, were not established. The sample contained less diversity than expected, and this made the application of an intersectional analysis difficult. However, among the five participants who were willing to engage in this study, there were clear indications of the complexity of contradictory locations of privilege and oppression across race, class, gender, and age.

Participants were pooled from a local organization that provides support services to LGBTQ youth in a suburb of New York. Prior to establishing participants, two meetings were held with a social worker and LGBTQ program services manager to establish permission to access potential participants and attend weekly meetings that serve as safe spaces of social
interaction, entertainment, and counseling. Starting in May of 2019, on a bi-weekly basis, I became part of a pool of volunteers that consists primarily of student counselors enrolled in local college social work programs. On Fridays from 5-11 pm, there were a total of seven stations that rotate each hour. Some stations served practical functions like beverages and snacks. Others were more administrative, such as participant sign-in and sign out. The DJ booth was very social, and others were more interactive, like the game room. Some appear mundane but are essential, like filling the condom baskets. Cumulatively, all of the stations very clearly provided for just a few hours, once a week, a place for LGBTQ youth to create positive relationships and participate in affirming activities. During the fall semester, an influx of student counselors required hours, so there was a break until January. In the interim, I was invited to attend staff training and the staff retreat. Bi-weekly participation in between college semesters and the following summer break was unfortunately suspended because of the Coronavirus pandemic.

Besides chaperoning and other volunteer events, I was invited as a guest speaker within a subgroup that meets on a different day and caters specifically to trans youth populations. This presentation served as my initial recruitment of participants, where intended research was introduced, and a handout with contact information was provided for those that might be interested. After that, a follow-up email was sent to the individuals willing to participate. Each participant was contacted separately to schedule an introductory interview (45-90 minutes). Interviews were located in a quiet space within the facility, before or after the attending events. At the interview, participants reviewed an informed consent form detailing the voluntary nature of participation and the right to discontinue at any time. Additionally, participants were provided with the names and phone numbers of multiple mental health resources available to them. All participants were also asked to provide a pseudonym to help mask any potential identity markers.
Expert Validation, Collaboration, and the Creation of an Interview Protocol

The primary source of data was the narrative interviews. Semi-structured interview questions were developed after carefully reviewing existing research related to trans youth specifically and within the LGBTQ collective. The research questions provided thematic considerations. Additionally, rapport, comfortability, and trustworthiness were paramount considerations in the interview protocol's design and organization. The intent was for the interview to become a conversation that shifted to a participant narrator and researcher listener (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). As the primary instrument used within the study, the protocol's validity was piloted with the participation of two experts whose names were replaced by pseudonyms. Pseudonyms were selected based on two main characters from Lowis Lowry’s The Giver, a well-known young adult dystopic novel. Both characters struggle with the sameness that is thrust upon them. Their struggle against dominant institutions provided a meaningful connection to the pseudonyms. Asher and Jonas both identify as transgender and work professionally for two different nonprofit organizations that support LGBTQ youth advocacy. These organizations each also run trans youth-specific programs.

Both experts reviewed the original interview questions, shared their personal experiences, and provided suggestions regarding adaptations. The first phase of the interview protocol refinement with Asher took place via Go to Meeting, a web-based online meeting video conferencing program. For over two hours, I provided a brief presentation that supplied background, the purpose of the study, and research questions. There was a short conversation in between, in which Asher asked a few clarifying questions, and we then went on to review the interview protocol. Overall, the initial feedback was positive; Asher suggested a few resources to consider, especially concerning what he termed non-academic but significant cultural
references. For example, he talked about language and how “sexuality” might be a preferred academic term, but “sexual orientation” might be less offensive to a participant. He brought up two questions in the original protocol that contained the phrasing, “transgender in high school.” Asher expressed the concern that he had not come out as trans until his sophomore year of college and had, in fact, not known what transgender meant. He felt that the wording needed to shift. These questions were revised to acknowledge that high school is, in fact, a period of varied transitions regarding disclosure and self-realization.

In phase two, Jonas helped to pilot the protocol. We met face to face in his office for a 90-minute interview, and then we debriefed afterward informally. During this session, we attempted to create a simulated experience for future interviews. Before starting, the informed consent form was reviewed, and a list of available mental health resources was provided. Even though these were unnecessary, it was all part of creating a feeling of what future interviews might entail. Despite all of my preparation, guiding an interview was much more difficult than I thought it would be. It took a while to move from stilted Q & A to a more conversational tone and then the preferred participant-led journey. From this phase, there were multiple changes made to the interview protocol. Initial tension and awkwardness concerns were mitigated by using photographs and other mementos or visual images as an icebreaker. I also realized a need to incorporate opportunities for participants to discuss gender, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation separately. The earlier draft did not establish these distinctions.

The final phase of member checking involved e-mail confirmation and a thank you to both Asher and Jonas. They needed to see that their input was valued, but I also wanted to provide another opportunity for feedback. Multiple sources to review the interview protocol provided stages of revision and development that were a vast improvement from the original.
Although validity is often considered an integral aspect of research, the discourse surrounding the conditions of legitimization is a centuries-old tradition and obscure. Lather’s (1993) view of the paralogical framing of validity specifically references member checking in data analysis. The concept of member checking was simulated in the development of this study through expert validation, collaboration, and the re-creation of the final narrative interview protocol. Participant member checking was also a part of the interview process, through transcript review between and after each phase. Additionally, participants reviewed their poetry collections that resulted from the poetic transcription methodology used to present this study's findings.

**Data Collection**

During the process of reviewing the literature and piloting the interview protocol, it was clear that to develop interview rapport and validity, additional forms of data needed to be incorporated into this dissertation. Participant interviews would remain the primary and substantive part of the data. However, the inclusion of ethnographic imbued participation, cultural immersion, and artifacts also helped inform the politics of knowing and being known (Lather, 1993). Tracy’s (2015) criteria for quality in qualitative research led to incorporating the following data units as layers to further substantiate the rigor, sincerity, and credibility of this study.

**Ethnographic Imbued Participation and Cultural Immersion**

The tradition of ethnographic study heavily influences qualitative research, and this explains the shades of ethnography that encouraged this researcher’s commitment to move beyond studying trans youth issues and seek opportunities for cultural immersion. The goal of surrounding oneself within a culture was, in part, related to deepening my understanding, but it was also an offshoot of the concern to address authenticity. Having an authentic or legitimate
voice was part of the internal dialogue surrounding my thoughts on qualitative research and validity. The elusive nature of validity cannot be easily resolved but can be addressed through a series of conscious counter practices designed to ground narrative analysis and representation (Lather, 1993). Proper ethnographic research requires a substantial amount of time in the field as a participant-observer. Due to this study's time constraints, a series of conscious steps were taken to bring myself closer to the participants in this study and improve my limited experience with LGBTQ specific spaces and places.

During the 2018-2019 school year, several conferences and workshops at local educational institutions, such as Queer Disruptions III at Columbia University, LGBTTeach Ed Camp, Unconscious Bias, and Fostering Diversity, provided another layer of exposure and consciousness-raising. Each experience dealt with different aspects of LGBTQ and trans-related concerns from multiple standpoints, academic-based, educator-based, and community-based. This work continued through the 2019-2020 school year, during the months of COVID-19’s social distancing protocols. Two online webinars, Kumashiro’s Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy and Social Justice Concerns and EdCamp’s Powerful learning at home, both addressed COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and the intersections that students and teachers must travel together. Three non-profit organizations also allowed me to become involved, learn, and share experiences alongside LGBTQ youth, adults, advocates, and allies. Volunteer opportunities at annual LGBTQ events, such as LGBTQ prom, Pride, and a TGNCNB Expo, were additional meaningful moments. My collaboration with multiple organizations was meant to inform this research, but also created another level of identity masking by providing various sites from which participants could be pooled.
During this cultural immersion journey, a journal documented experiences and served as a drafting area for questions that needed to be researched or items that required revisiting. These journal entries provided a constant inner dialogue that forced me to consider my blind spots. Journal entries continued throughout the entire dissertation process and provided additional layers of analysis. Journaling was not meant as an additive method and was intended as a critical methodological tool for developing and auditing researcher reflexivity (Berger, 2015; Orange, 2016; Pagis, 2009). While these aspects were meant to provide a foundation and entry point for this dissertation, it was also vital to understand that this work was not intended to benefit my research solely. I continued volunteering and hope to become more involved both during and after this process. Whether I provided connections to LGBTQ educational speakers or planning professional development, the alliances were meant to be mutually beneficial. They also offered an additional platform explicitly for trans high school students.

**Interviews with Trans High School Graduates**

Narrative interview structure can be organized based on the number of participants, the number of meetings, and the number or type of questions incorporated (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These tangible considerations are a primary detail of design, but an equally essential factor was cultivating trust between the participant and researcher. The interviews were conducted in three sessions. Session one served as the ice breaker and life history phase. This session was between 45-90 minutes long and recorded using the Voice Recorder app on the researcher’s iPhone and iPad. These recordings were saved on the devices themselves and were not be stored on any cloud-based storage systems.

The use of artifacts and social media created a more natural and conversational interview. Participants were asked to bring in their high school yearbook, any high school photographs,
awards, or memorabilia that they might be willing to share. Most participants shared photos digitally; through social media accounts such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat. Using social media was a more convenient way of sharing images to revisit their high school memories. Digital media from their cell phone was classified as an artifact as well. This preliminary exercise helped ease initial awkwardness. Forging connections through conversations surrounding visual representation within the pictures and artifacts served as another strategy to elicit detailed descriptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Session two made use of the following semi-structured interview protocol:

*Thank you for meeting with me. Are you comfortable with this location for our interview?*

*In this interview, I would like to learn more about your high school experiences. Is there anything you would like to know about regarding the purpose of this research?*

*Before we begin, let’s go over informed consent. There is a form that I would like to review with you.*

*Let’s start with a few basic questions.*

1. When did you graduate from high school?
2. Are you currently enrolled in college?
   - If so, what degree are you pursuing?
   - If not, would you tell me about your career?
3. Since I will not be disclosing your real name, how would you like to be referred to in this study?
4. What are your preferred pronouns? Are there any specific LGBTQ terms or vocabulary that you would prefer I use?
5. Tell me about yourself.
   - How would you describe your childhood?
   - What is your relationship like with your siblings and parents?
   - Are there any extended family members that have been particularly influential?
6. Tell me about your community.
   - How diverse is your town or neighborhood?
   - Where did you hang out as a teenager outside of high school?
7. Tell me about high school.
   - What were your favorite subjects? Can you remember any time that LGBTQ or trans topics were discussed in class or a part of the curriculum?
   - What type of student were you? Do you think that being trans had any impact on your grades, interactions with teachers or peers?
- Were you involved in any sports or extra-curricular activities? Were there any clubs or events that were LGBTQ centered or affirming?
- Were you popular in high school? What cliques did you hang out with? Who were your closest friends? Were they LGBTQ or cisgender?
- Were you open about your gender identity? What about gender expression? What made you more or less comfortable about disclosing your trans identity?
- When did you first realize you were trans? Was there a critical moment?
- When you were in high school, did you hear anything, or were you aware of anything related to name, preferred pronoun, or all-gender bathrooms?
- How did your school handle heteronormative rites of passage like Homecoming Court or Prom King and Queen? Were there any dress code rules, sports participation policies, or other issues that came up while you were in high school?
- Did you ever have an issue that required the help of a guidance counselor, social worker, administrator, or teacher? How effective were your school’s social-emotional support resources?

8. Have you visited your high school since graduation? Why or why not?
- Would you change anything about your actions or voice in high school if you could?
- If you could go back and talk to a group of __________, what would you say?

Is there anything we’ve missed in our conversation today? Is there anything that you would like me to emphasize regarding your high school experiences in this study?

After I transcribe our interview, I will share it with you via e-mail. I would also like to schedule a follow-up after you have reviewed the transcription. Just in case we need to clarify or follow up on some of the topics that may surface from today’s conversation. Would you be willing to meet again?

These questions were prepared and piloted for participants and provided an opportunity for them to take control of their responses and create a more conversational tone (Bhattacharya, 2017).

After our first session, this phase provided time for both the researcher and participant to reflect and provoked a more detailed exchange. This interview was 45-90 minutes long and recorded using the Voice Recorder app on the researcher’s iPhone and iPad. These recordings were saved on the devices themselves and were not stored on any cloud-based storage systems.

Session three was intended to serve as a 45-90-minute member check session to clarify any part of earlier interviews. Participants were provided via e-mail transcripts of these sessions to review before our meeting. This phase was also recorded using the same technology.
Transcription of all three sessions was done by hand by the researcher and then transferred to a word document. The decision to personally transcribe instead of using a professional transcription service was designed to improve and familiarize the researcher with the data. Prior to recording, participants received an additional consent form with recording and transcription details.

**Data Analysis**

Clandinin (2013) describes the interview as the starting point of analysis, from which narrative inquirers begin to transcribe and compose field texts. After the interviews, narrative methodology involved member checking by providing participants copies of the transcripts to review in the last phase. Condensing large amounts of data presented within participant transcripts required multiple readings, analytic memos, and a consideration of the research questions, the literature review, and the researcher journal. After hand-coding, each participant interview, KH Coder, a free open source software for computer-assisted coding analysis, provided a review of word frequency and keyword in context (KWIC).

**Coding**

One essential part of the analysis included classifying and interpreting qualitative data through the coding process. This process involved aggregating participant responses into categories and then assigning a label (Saldana & Omasta, 2017). Participant responses to the interview protocol were explored first through both in vivo and a priori coding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The following examples provided descriptions and applications for the multiple types of coding that guided my analysis (see Table 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Summary of General Coding Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coding Method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coding Category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Versus Coding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Adapted from *Qualitative research: Analyzing life* by J. Saldana and M. Omasta (2017).

These codes represented additional researcher opportunities to read and re-read the interview transcriptions. From these codes, other codes were developed by clustering and chunking descriptions of routines, rituals, rules, roles, and relationships, as well as emergent categories (Bhattacharya, 2017; Saldana & Omasta, 2017). Transcripts were organized in a table with a column on either side of the text. There were initially three stages of the re-reading and drafting transcripts. The first time was paired with listening to the audio recordings to confirm there were no missing parts or errors and ensure the removal of any personal identifiers. The second read was paired with my field notes and journal notes, and these were placed by date within the three interview phases. The third and final read before coding involved reviewing my research proposal, specifically looking at theory, critical lens, the literature review, and research questions.

During transcription of the interviews, it became clear that I needed to refine my coding framework for the stages required to analyze, organize, and think about the participants' high school experiences. Creating a preliminary codebook helped to organize analysis into five categories and more clearly detailed descriptive elements of each step. The following illustration is a conceptualization of the first stage of analysis.

*Figure 6*

*Coding Category Stages*
Note. Five categorical cycles were developed in the first stage of coding analysis.

My initial codebook combined point of view, personal pronouns, and identity together. This is presented as an appropriate method of condensing data; all three are centered around pronouns. While creating descriptions for each code, noteworthy differences drove me to keep them separate. Personal pronoun I-statements typically relate to time (I-present, I-past, I-future). While these often also relate to personal and social constructs, identity factors are both assigned and adopted. The contributions of external factors on a person’s sense of self needed to be acknowledged. Also, as a narrative tool point of view appeared evident, the interviews were all
from a first-person narrator perspective. Combining the three codes, therefore, would limit the
depth of analysis despite overlapping characteristics. The nesting of sub-themes during the
second coding cycle was more organic, with these interlocking relationships in mind.

All codes were recorded and organized in an updated codebook before considering
surfacing themes, interpretations, and representations of the collected data. Codes were
sometimes specifically repeated words used by the participant or were descriptive of the
participants' words in a passage or section of the transcript. While a theme may have contained a
code-word, themes were intended to link ideas or concepts established after analyzing the codes
and examining contextual similarities and differences. After establishing the themes present in
the interviews, I struggled with how to shape the emerging data. The complexities of
representation seemed magnified by the thought of relying solely on a summative analysis, and
poetry provided a means of enriching participant profiles. Poems created from interview
transcripts exercised the reflective and reflexive nature of qualitative data analysis and are often
used as a research tool (Butler-Kisber, 2002; Cahnmann, 2003; Fitzpatrick & Fitzpatrick, 2015;
Furman, 2007). Using poetry provides an additional means of portraying contextual nuances and
diversity of experience.

Often referred to as poetic transcription, found poems are used to engage the reader using
the participants' words (Glense, 1997). Drawing from Schrauben & Leigh (2019), the I-am
poetry structure provided an initial framework for forming each participant’s poems. To
construct the poems, I grouped lines of text from all three interview phases beneath emerging
themes from the codebook to form raw poetic forms. Afterward, excerpted lines were read aloud
to eliminate words or phrases or join groups of lines into stanzas. When paring down text, I
concentrated on not losing the unique speaking rhythm or pauses that were a part of each
participant's self-expression. “I” statements were re-organized and arranged in conjunction with other pronouns that emphasized intra-and interpersonal relationships. All pronouns were capitalized as a reminder of the importance of preferred pronouns to transgender individuals and signal a challenge to sexuality and gender norms (McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2018). Participants also received a copy of their poems to review and respond to before the findings section was finalized. Appendix J includes the entire participant poetry collection. These poems enriched an understanding of the participant by tracing the chronology of particular relationships and their representation of self. Individual poems were placed as introductions to each participant profile and within the discussion of themes. The use of poetic transcription enriched the findings of this study. Trans participant voices document self-discovery and acknowledgment in spaces filled with others' taunting influence or stigmatizing silence. Poetic excerpts of participant interviews highlight moments shared, encourage thoughtful sense-making, and stimulate empowering trans actions.

**Point(s) of View**

In stories, the point of view is the perspective or narrative voice that guides the reader. In research, participant voices are mediated by a researcher narrator. Mediating for me meant positioning the participants and multiple points of view in the forefront. I wondered if my voice should remain a quasi-third person narrator. English teacher instincts reinforced this, reminding me that a first-person account and personal pronouns were inappropriate in formal writing. After the first few drafts, my decision to create distance from myself and the participants haunted me. In the pursuit of an objective tone, words on the page seemed clinical, and the blinking cursor of my laptop was an indictment. The invisible, unobtrusive, and subtle narrator identity instead read hollow and inauthentic. I realized that the alluringly deceptive ruse of third-person credibility
left much to be desired. In writing myself out of the narrative analysis, connections built in conversation during the interview process were lost. Addressing this meant a return and a re-read of the original transcripts and journal notes.

One section from the first phase provided a means to situate myself within the process of data analysis and acknowledge personal entanglements. The start of the first interview included a brief sharing of a few of my high school pictures. This section prompted a review of corresponding journal notes written before and after interview sessions. In the corner of one page’s margin was the phrase, “create a reciprocal beginning,” a reminder to share my background as a means to break initial unease and build trust. This exercise was initially lighthearted; participants enjoyed analyzing my high school photos, especially the lamentable fashion choices and hairstyles. I had forgotten about pieces of conversation that included intimate and personal stories of my high school years. These allowed each participant to learn who I was and why I was there. I revisit my first meeting with each participant in *The Icebreaker*, an attempt to present the heart of my intentions, the origins of my taking action, and a window into the intersections of my own identity.

*THE ICEBREAKER*
Starting points, to talk about who we were or who we are
Who we want to be; places or people we were with, and why

These were the horrible hair years of high school
Those are the parents, well half, my dad and his ex-wife
Didn’t live with my mom; she’s Vietnamese
I have a stepdad and a brother too
Those are half-siblings and me, the odd one,
a dark splat in a sea of light skin, eyes, and hair
At my mom’s house, she’d talk an unfamiliar language
So foreign, but I felt shame like I should have known
Teachers used to ask if I was adopted
Those are me in kickline and track

Three years of high school, trying to fit in
Good grades, clubs, sports, popular
Then something snapped, I quit everything, ghosted friends
My Dad got on my case about activities for college
So, I tried out for the play, said I didn’t care if I got a part
After the audition, at my locker in an empty hallway
A girl saw me crying and considered walking right by,
but she couldn’t walk past someone in pain
We talked, she drove me home, we became best friends

A few decades later, she’s still putting up with me
Before her, I never verbalized feelings or my thoughts
Never learned to deal with missing half of who I was
I felt my difference was the first thing people saw
Still struggle with balance outside
the labels of others and those self-imposed
That’s why I’m here, well, part of it
A student sent me an e-mail about being trans
Despite my awkward bumps and clunks with pronouns
somehow, they enjoyed my class that year

Feelings re-surfaced about being a teenager, wanting to be normal
Pretending but inside, screaming, “Something is wrong!”
College taught me to look for certain red flags and
I had almost let a student slip through unnoticed
Maybe others before them; faced a reckoning
I was guilty too; part of the problem
Something is wrong with a system that forces a student
to do the work of being acknowledged
Nobody seemed to have answers that did anything
So, I went back to college, and now I’m here

This narrative poem was formed by reviewing my words across phase one interview
transcripts of all five participants. The interaction between the researcher and participants in this
qualitative study presented many expected and unexpected challenges but erasing myself from
the analysis meant ignoring those tensions. Deconstructing my thinking through poetry forced a
significant transparency that revealed the foundation of personal tensions and dilemmas. Using
poetry as a reflexive approach provided critical self-reflection in the nuanced process of ethical
considerations.
Care of Human Subjects

The narratives included in this dissertation explored trans peoples' retrospective accounts of the high school experience; all were over 18. Due to the subject matter's sensitive nature and the concern that the participants be treated ethically, multiple safeguards were prepared in advance. Participants were advised of their rights regarding informed consent. Additionally, a list of mental health resources was provided. These resources were available free of cost or at a significantly reduced cost. The data and all other aspects of the dissertation did not contain identity markers to protect confidentiality. Participants also selected pseudonyms for use within this dissertation. This study required International Review Board (IRB) approval. Before data collection occurred, an IRB training course and a detailed application were provided regarding the intended research topic and activities. All steps outlined through LIU Post’s IRB were strictly followed to protect the recruited human research subjects' rights and welfare. While a regulatory body was a significant part of the ethical considerations, all parties involved in the study were consulted and contributed to the construction, representation, and interpretation of the data.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

This research study's contradictions regarding validity reflected the imprecise application of a quantitative term in qualitative research. A qualitative research paradigm required different approaches to rigor within the study and shifts in thinking overall (Creswell, 2002; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lather, 2006; Saldana & Omasta, 2017; Tracy, 2010). I created the following diagram to serve as a template for the inclusion of various forms of validity. These concepts were used as critical inclusions to develop rigor and authenticity within this study.

Figure 6. Validating Qualitative Research
Anticipated limitations of the study included my own identity, emerging literature, and participant sampling. A concerted effort was made to acknowledge the limits of my perspective. Acknowledging how my privileged status influenced the representation of participant narratives' does not remove the potential for subjective bias (Pillow, 2003). Due to this concern, it was imperative that ethnographic imbued participation, expert validation, and member checking be incorporated into the study. The literature review counteracted this, as well. However, the field of transgender research is both fluid and emergent. There was no established consensus or uniformly accepted paradigm.

The participant sample size was not intended to provide generalizable results, and this was an appropriate limitation. The concepts of transferability, dependability, and confirmability replaced positivist criteria (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Transferability suggests that the research overlaps the reader's experiences and these ideas work within the context of their own lives (Tracy, 2010). Dependability and confirmability were not dependent upon replication but on auditing trails and member checks that established the trustworthiness of researcher decisions.

*Figure 7.* Tangible approaches to exercising validating practices within a qualitative study.
and processes (Bhattacharya, 2017; Saldana & Omasta, 2017). The selection of college-age participants recalling their memories of high school was a purposeful decision. Undertaking research with high school age students would be problematic due to concerns that additional stress was unnecessary for younger ages currently struggling with transitioning, coming out, family and friend reactions, bullying, or harassment. Ethical issues like consent taking and the worries around fears of raising potentially distressing topics were reasons for shifting participant age. My initial concern over validity, participant age, and sample size had then been mitigated. However, other sampling limitations developed during the data collection process.

Collectively participants lacked the diversity anticipated in an exploration of intersectional social constructs across multiple forms of marginalization. This limitation was a result of sample selection and the pool of potential participants that volunteered. My selection criteria did not explicitly identify race as an inclusion factor. After spending over six months working as a volunteer at the agency that housed the trans group, I witnessed firsthand a large amount of diversity across gender identity, sexual orientation, race, culture, religion, and education. I choose not to list identity factors other than trans, in part because I assumed that diversity would organically be present. There was also the fear of restricting the number of potential candidates and not reaching the sample size proposed. A total of eight individuals expressed interest in participating. One was rejected because they had not come out or disclosed their gender identity to family or friends, and there was the concern that participation might impact their desire to remain closeted. The other two exclusions were a result of their withdrawal after initial contact was made. The remaining candidates fit my proposed sample size, and time constraints also limited further recruitment. Time was a principal concern,
specifically having enough time to complete the study within the boundaries of my teacher-practioner and researcher-college student academic calendars.

The influence of a global pandemic also impacted sample selection and timing. Three phases of interviews for five candidates in a setting that required a reservation process for available rooms would be an involved process under normal circumstances but became even more complicated as the world became more aware of COVID-19. My research proposal received IRB permission on February 11, 2020. On that same day, my daughter, who was scheduled to attend a school trip to Italy, Spain, and England, asked me if the virus her teachers talked about would suspend travel, and the trip might be canceled. That night I emailed the trans group program director to set up a recruitment meeting of participants with the looming worry over Coronavirus's potential impact on data collection. The threat of social restrictions, stay-at-home orders, school closures, as well as the continual coverage of infection/hospitalization rates and deaths, placed a tremendous strain on the completion of data collection. Any thoughts of expanding the participant pool were displaced, and I was frankly relieved that I was able to finish a week before Trump declared a national state of emergency.

Weeks later, while coding, analyzing, and drafting my final chapters, instead of relief, I faced the realization that my participant sample might severely limit the analysis and findings. Four out of the five participants were white and from suburban middle-class backgrounds. These demographics contradicted my intersectional theory framework. While my participants were part of a marginalized identity due to age, gender, and sexual orientation, they were also a part of a dominant and privileged identity. Intersectionality theory is intended to articulate the experiences of individuals whose multiple identities simultaneously experience oppression, racial inequities, and cultural disparities that are vastly different from white populations. While the
absence of diversity is a limitation, the participant narratives included in this study address power, oppression, and control within contradictory and complimentary social identities and contexts. The representation of experiences that are both a part of dominant and subordinate identities is not intended as a shift away from social justice or anti-racist ideologies. Instead, acknowledging the implications of middle class white suburban trans identities provided unexpected explorations of white silence and white racial socialization. The simultaneous membership in divergent social structures also reflected recursive and reflective patterns of power compliance and advantage while navigating cultural norms and differences. Overall, the findings of this study should be considered with the limitations mentioned above in mind. This consideration should also include the opportunity to extend and refine discourses surrounding the intersections of oppressive and privileged systems of power and control.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The fourth chapter presents the narratives of five trans high school graduates from a suburb of New York. This narrative study explored retrospective trans student experiences of high school, specifically questioning the relationships between student identity, agency, and the influence of school functions. Five recent graduates were interviewed in three distinct interview phases. Phase one served as an ice breaker and general life history session. The second phase consisted of a semi-structured interview protocol, and the final phase provided a member check opportunity to review earlier interview transcripts. Table 5 provides a demographic summary of each participant.

Table 5

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race Ethnicity</th>
<th>Preferred Pronouns</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Note: Trans is the shortened version of transgender, an umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity or expression is different from their sex assigned at birth. M represents male, and F represents female. NB indicates non-binary, neither exclusively male nor female. B=bisexual, S=straight, D=demisexual, P=pansexual, PR=panromantic

Narrative introductions are presented in chronological order based on age. Collectively, one might argue that these participants, on the surface, provide a one-dimensional view of race, gender, and differences regarding sexual orientation. Intersectional theory is intended to conceptualize the experiences of individuals who experience various systems of oppression across multiple identity factors (Crenshaw, 1991). Beyond acknowledging this limitation, I realized the intersectionality lens needed to be thoughtfully re-examined to address the implications of absent demographic diversity.

This study’s participants shared the contradiction of gender and sex discrimination while simultaneously experiencing a privileged white, suburban, and middle-class identity. Although the intersection of privilege and oppression was a significant factor, ignoring the absence of diversity would have been a subversion of Crenshaw’s contributions to social justice and racial liberation. Initially, I searched for a means to use intersectionality by focusing primarily on the intersections of power and control. The Duluth model and adoptions in existing workplace bullying studies explore the intersections of power and control; extending this to trans individuals in high school seemed reasonable (Shepard & Pence, 1999; Scott, 2018). As I began to make adjustments, the Queer, Feminist, and Deconstructivist theoretical influences within me cried fraud and condemned my colonizing considerations of a colorblind version of intersectionality. In this study, participant narrative poems embody identities situated within both oppression and privilege (Kumashiro, 2002). They also embody the profoundly entrenched
roots of white racial socialization that create a racist and silencing neutrality (Mohan, 2011). As a collection, participant poetry serves as an entrance into the stories shared, recounted, and composed. Their stories encourage an examination of the systematic erasure of trans identities and the oppressive colorblind frameworks that indoctrinate and perpetuate a hesitancy to consider race and ethnicity openly.

**Poetic Inquiry and the Discovery of Narrative Themes**

The themes presented in this section are meant to portray key concepts that emerged during narrative analysis and are re-presented through found poetry. These are not intended to provide a singular or universal understanding, nor should they be considered generalizable to all trans high school students' realities. Additionally, these are not intended as a summary of key parts of the interviews. Instead, the application of poetic inquiry is intended to highlight the complicated and distinct trans student high school experience. The analysis of this study was guided by the following research questions, which helped to identify and shape relevant themes:

- How do trans people narrate their retrospective accounts of the high school experience?

- What do the retrospective high school narratives of trans people reveal about the relationships and influences of identity, agency, and school function?

Within the intersections of both individual and collective participant expression, there existed both anticipated and unexpected findings. I attribute this to the participants who helped guide our conversations to places beyond the research questions' scope. *Poetic Introductions* are the first set of poems presented. These center participant voices as they identify and name themselves within the study. Each introductory poem is paired with a narrative summary. *The Politics of Caring* serves as an overarching theme under which remaining poem groups are housed. All three of the poetic sections that follow are organized by the research question
criteria of identity, agency, and school function. *Identity: Assigned Self, Questioning Self, True Self*, the second set, details shifts in how trans students discover and define self in conjunction with their physical body, gender expression, and other unique aspects of transitioning. Following the second section, *The (Dys)functions of High School* provides poetry concerning both academic and social aspects of the trans high school experience. The final section of poetry, *Agency: Trans Actions and the Call for Change*, begins with a poem of joined lines across participant narratives. Together, participant voices consider the future with distinctions between what is explicitly demanded, what is implied by silence, and what is left unacknowledged. As a collection, all four sections express each participant’s high school experiences while drawing attention to the subtle and overt actions that reinforce a dominant and oppressive status quo. Data is represented first through poetic transcription to place participant voices at the forefront. This section closes with a thematic analysis to outline and discuss patterns identified as participants mediated dominant and oppressive systems.

**Construction Rationale and How to “Read” Participant Poems**

Poetic transcription was a method of inquiry, analysis, and representation. The resulting poems transcend traditional academic research limitations and create an opening for emotion, subjectivity, and reflexivity. An integral feature of each sections' organization included the intentional construction of various storylines that develop distinct events. Poems were placed in groupings to move beyond a biographical accounting of places and circumstances. Contextual details are layered within the lines of irregular free verse. The refusal to be defined by a set form is reflected in choosing to avoid a proscribed poetry type or a set number of lines. Each poem has a clear topic, introduced by its title. Intentional line breaks and punctuation mirror and
highlight speech. Stanzas provide topic shifts or build intentional progressions through internal and external conflicts.

Faulkner and Cloud (2019) present poetic inquiry as a way to connect personal stories to a collective political dialogue. Their characterization of beginning with the messy and ambiguous to stimulate social justice discourse extended poetic transcription goals. Overall, poems in this study communicate revealed intimacies and imprint feelings: the troubling, the heartbreaking, the pride, and the relief of what was, what is, and what may be. Beyond providing the reasoning and intentions that guided poetry making, I offer a few suggestions on reading the poems. Multiple reads are encouraged. Read once fully without stopping and then again. Identify the overall topic and the emphasis revealed through word choice, word order, and imagery. Read aloud; to engage multiple senses and replicate what is meant as a proxy of conversation and, more importantly, each participant’s voice. Read between the lines, questioning what is said and what is not, with particular attention to pronouns. Perhaps in reading, contemplating, and bearing witness to the experiences expressed in these poems, a space of connection will form between researcher, participant, and reader.

Poetic Introductions

The following poems are a creative synthesis of and encapsulation of the essence of conversations establishing participants' initial representation of self during interview phases. They all serve as an introduction or starting point for the discussion of research findings. These poems also tell the story behind each participant’s pseudonym choice, illuminating significant associations or links. The renaming process also provided insight into the complicated intertwining of name and identity for trans individuals. All participants carefully considered the assumptions that might result and deliberately explained why they selected the pseudonym.
Jem: “They don't really want to know. They don't care. They don't care at all.”

YOU CAN CALL ME JEM
I never actually watched the show
I know SHE had two sides to HER,
but nope wasn’t thinking that

I was thinking gemstones
I think maybe a “J” works better as a name
but, maybe just leave it

I used to play Pokémon
I played the emerald version,
but I think it was the first sign

I liked that choice of being male or female
I wanted to see if there was a difference as a girl,
but I ended up choosing to be a boy

I didn’t want people to make fun
I loved that the girl character’s hair waved when SHE ran,
but instead, I said something about extra frames and the mission

I was very young
I had no clue what it meant,
but I really think it was the first indication I was trans

Jem (she/her) is a 24-year-old white transwoman. She “thought she was bi, but maybe lesbian” and, in general, struggles with the labels, wishing others could just see her as an “actual woman.” Jem has been out of high school for six years and currently attends a local college taking one class this semester, “just because that’s how the scheduling worked out.” Jem is pursuing a degree in digital technology and attributes that to the “double-edged sword of video games,” which made her “more of an outsider, but also represented freedom.” Her joke that she’s on the extended “five-year” plan is immediately explained. During her senior year, severe issues with depression stemmed from years of self-hate and failed attempts to “push it back” to try and fit in. Jem mentions the “blank slate” of college, giving her the confidence to return after the first year, throw on some “bright red lipstick,” and come out to childhood friends about being
trans. Something she was unable to do in high school. She describes how their rejection and losing friendships was another emotional setback that “broke me just a little.” Jem couldn’t “go back into the closet” and ultimately took a medical leave for mental health reasons.

Jem admits that she hates looking at pictures from “before I even started figuring things out” and that it reminds her of a time when “there were only two emotions, apathy and anger.” Counseling and the support of her mother helped Jem to start “accepting, that I might be trans, but I have self-worth, and I don’t need to kill myself.” Jem believes that if she could go back to high school, she would “change everything. I can get two plus two equals four, but like emotionally, sometimes it's two plus two equals five.” Jem believes that high school's primary message was “to do well academically and go to college and get a good job.” Other than that, she believes, “They don't really want to know. They don't care. They don't care at all.” Despite achieving good grades and “looking like the typical American boy nerd,” the high school experience for Jem was a period of emotional “lockdown.”

Adam: “I guess they had their own things to focus on. Maybe they didn't particularly care.”

YOU CAN CALL ME ADAM
MY first name was pretty gender neutral
I chose MY name when
I wasn't sure what
I identified as fully
I changed it to a shorthand version, but it was too short,

I cycled through middle names, like people cycle through underwear
I got it legally changed and had to decide
I picked a name that gave ME the same initials
I was given at birth
MY parents appreciated that

I had an idea about what YOU could call me
I considered it as a middle name
I was like really into a show called Degrassi High
I like that Adam, one of the characters, was
MY first representation of a trans man
Adam (he/him) is a 23-year-old white transman. He identifies as demisexual and panromantic, which means he can be romantically attracted to “any person of any gender or sexuality.” Adam further explains, “they're related in like the whole scheme of LGBTQ, but it's more like apples and oranges. There's a lot of letters that have been added to the acronym.” His frustration around these labels is evident, and he admits, “there is still a lot of stigma around it because there needs to be an education within the LGBTQ population as well. It’s not just cis people. Gay and bi people are very actively transphobic.” Adam is currently pursuing a law degree and wants “to be able to help people who don't have the opportunities that I've had.” He wonders if “subconsciously,” his own experiences made him want to be a lawyer. For Adam, high school was far from a “magical” time, regardless of the “nice view of the water.”

Adam spent most school days “nervous about the prospect of being beaten up.” That never happened, but he mentions that the building itself “is basically built like a prison.” Hannah Montana’s double life is his self-comparison, “At high school, there was one side of myself presented, and then here it was a different aspect of my personality that was able to come out.” Here is a local advocacy agency that serves LGBTQ youth. Through this agency, Adam made friends and “was so involved here, advocating and putting myself out there and going to these conferences in upstate New York and going to Pride and putting myself on tv, and all these things were on Facebook.” Through this association, Adam also decided to start the name change process. He mentions high school administrators and a guidance counselor who said his name couldn’t be changed on the attendance, school id, or diploma for “legal reasons.” As a compromise, he was able “to get the name that I wanted in the yearbook and called at graduation.” Despite this achievement, Adam recalls the adults that made it challenging to adopt
his chosen name, use the bathroom, or remember his pronouns.” He sums this up by saying, “I guess they had their own things to focus on. Maybe they didn't particularly care.”

Grant: “I care about you; there are millions of people out there that care.”

YOU CAN CALL ME GRANT
I picked a name for you; it was
MY first name choice
I didn't pick Grant because of the military
I did have that consideration
MY Grant is actually one of
MY favorite superheroes

I didn’t keep it, because when
MY mom came out to
MY dad for ME, SHE said
HE was asking about YOU, and
HE wanted to know what's the deal with
MY birth name now

I just decided to go find a name
MY favorite tv show character, HIS name is Grant
MY mom wasn't a huge fan of it
SHE said SHE's tired of "G" names in my family
SHE helped ME pick out a different name, and that's how
I chose MY actual name

Grant (he/him) is a 22-year-old white trans man. He identifies as bisexual but is frustrated by people who think, “He’s just another guy” and make assumptions about sexuality, even if he has “the virtue of passing.” Grant is currently enrolled in a local community college as a criminal justice major. He planned on a military career in high school, but after the “trans military ban and some mental health stuff, being a police officer was an adaptation.” Unlike other participants, Grant believes that his high school was “very, very good about a lot of things, very on top of making sure people didn’t get bullied.” Despite feeling uncomfortable with himself, Grant stresses, “it was one of the better times in my life.” To fit in, though, he confesses, “I disassociated so much from myself.” Leaving behind the child that thought, “I want to wear clothes that the boys in my school wear. I want to play with G.I. Joe's.” Grant’s
grandfather, his “idol, was a Navy man.” Grant dreamed of enlisting in the military, not playing with “Barbies or wearing pink clothes,” which made him “stand out.” He vividly remembers wanting to join the boys, and instead, “I got rocks thrown at me.” The elementary and middle school years were “tough; I got bullied a lot.” In ninth grade, Grant joined the marching band and “tried to fake everything into making it, because my entire school career, I was always the outsider.”

The marching band was Grant’s “ticket in” and where he found “a family in bandmates and band director that made me feel included.” For Grant, marching and the uniform were “another sort of conformity and militaristic.” He admits that now he feels like everyone “knew exactly what was going on.” For years, Grant suffered moments of rage alone in his room. One time, “hurting my hand, punching something out of anger.” The next day he was sent to the nurse “because my hand was all bruised.” At a resulting check-in at the guidance counselor’s office, the hand was barely mentioned, and he ended up “just talking about college applications.” Grant believes “that the guidance counselor didn’t know the real me.” As an honors student and band captain, Grant avoided any adult looking too deeply. Grant is not sure if maybe someone should have noticed and if he was “maybe cheated because I kept to myself to certain things that I knew were acceptable.” Besides coming out earlier, Grant wishes he could go back, comfort his younger self, and say, “I care about you; there are millions of people out there that care.”

Grantaire: I'm queer in a system that doesn't respect me, get me or care to know me.”

YOU CAN CALL ME GRANTAIRE
I was thinking of Hugo cause, Victor Hugo,
HE's like MY favorite author. Then,
I was thinking of almost every character
but probably Grantaire

HE's a very minor character in a group of student revolutionaries
HE's the one that says, “I don't believe in your revolution.”
HE and HIS foil are written in a homoerotic way; it’s MY favorite book

I love everything about HIM
HE has HIS flaws, but I’ve always kind of connected with HIM and thought, “Oh,
HE’s just like ME.”

YOU don't believe in something, but
YOU still have like so much love and compassion for
YOUR friends that do, even if YOU share different beliefs
HE has so much admiration for HIS friends

That’s something I aspire to be

Grantaire (they/them) is a 22-year-old and white. They originally came out as trans because it was easier for others to understand but now consider themselves non-binary. They identify as pansexual, but they also use the phrase “gender-blind” to emphasize that attraction is not based on gender or sex. Grantaire explains that the “quest for perfection was very present when I was in high school. I tried my best under the circumstances to be a leader and be at the forefront.” They describe themselves in class as “I always want to have a hand up, and I want the answer.” However, in social settings, Grantaire was “kind of reserved.” Anxiety disorders and depression created attendance concerns, and “an intervention meeting resulted in a program shift to an alternate school for six periods of the day.” That meeting included Grantaire’s parents and several administrators. They were told that absences and grades would be the subjects of the meeting. Instead, administrators brought up their trans identity and concerns that their needs would be better met in a half-day alternate school setting. Grantaire expressed his frustration, “it was not the topic of the meeting. It was supposed to be about attendance.”

Grantaire admits that it was “easier to let it go at that point” but wonders about AP courses he could no longer take and other missed opportunities. They also wonder if an earlier request to “use the boy’s bathroom and change names” might have created “a problem, they don't
want to have to deal with it.” Time schedule conflicts between the two schools meant missing “special events” and “there was definitely a sense of otherness.” Grantaire acknowledges that a part of them was “always like that’s something I want to partake in, “whether it was Valentine candy grams or homecoming. Instead of spending “every day, kind of navigating a cisgender world, but like on top being a literal outsider for half the day.” High school became something to get through for Grantaire, and they emphasize, “I'm queer in a system that doesn't respect me, get me or care to know me.”

Usnavi: “She was just being nice because it was her job. It wasn't like she genuinely cared.”

YOU CAN CALL ME USNAVI DE LA VEGA
I got the name from MY favorite musical
HE’s like a dorky Hispanic bodega dude
HE sings this opening song, “In the Heights,” and shows how
HE struggles with embracing
HIS American and Latino sides
HIS neighborhood is Washington Heights in New York City and
HE wonders about the cost of the American dream
HE yearns for the Dominican Republic and home, but when
HE goes back he finds out that
HIS home is really in New York city
I just think like that’s the sweetest little story

Usnavi (he/him) is an 18-year-old Hispanic trans man. Usnavi identifies as bisexual, and like Grantaire, his high school experience involved two separate settings. In eleventh and twelfth grade, Usnavi split the school day, “six periods a day at a vocational school, learning about computer animation.” This experience is one that inspired Usnavi’s current college major, “digital art and design.” He puts more weight on the release he felt when he could “escape and get away from the hurt of people in my main high school.” Despite being “on principal’s honor roll” and being “really good at the cello,” Usnavi describes having very little self-worth. He attributes this in part to the “passive-aggressive” or “surface” behavior of others, who “should know better.”
Usnavi’s relationships with authority figures contributed to “mental health issues that had gotten to the point of really bad depression and suicidal thoughts.” A high school art teacher and “second mother” was the “first adult I came out to.” This same teacher would deny Usnavi’s preferred name, stating that she “needs to have a parent's permission to call you this name.”

Another likable English teacher joked, “that his wife and himself were going as Caitlin and Bruce Jenner for Halloween.” Usnavi hopes for more teacher training on LGBTQ and trans specific topics because, “I didn't see it happening, but I feel it needs to happen because especially with gender pronouns, adults get caught up in using they and them pronouns singularly.” The “few teachers that went above and beyond” prohibited blatant bullying and name-calling but “never went in deep to notice the subtle stuff.” This avoidance included other non-instructional adult professionals, such as the school social worker Usnavi describes as, “…just being nice because it was her job. It wasn't like she genuinely cared.”

**The Concept of Caring**

Participant profiles began with poems that provided background to their pseudonym and a direct quote. In selecting these quotes, I attempted to portray the concept of caring as an overarching thematic thread that connected participant experiences. The apparent absence of care across all participants triggered memories of my undergraduate education courses at SUNY Geneseo and reading, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* by Nel Noddings (1984). As a Women’s Studies minor and an English major, a book written by a woman amongst educational philosophers such as Gardner, Dewey, and Bloom stood out in a heavily white, male-dominated curriculum. Nodding’s interest in caring education began during her time as a high school math teacher; she would later earn a Ph.D. from Stanford with a dissertation on the ethics of care in education (Stone, 2018). I revisited this book with a sense of
irony and considered the title as a novice Post Structuralist Feminist and Queer researcher. In Nodding's preface to the 2013 edition of *Caring*, she acknowledged that the subtitle created complaints surrounding “the connotations of “feminine” [that] are off-putting and do not capture what I intended to convey (xiii).” Nodding's admission of the problematic phrasing included a new subtitle, “A Relational Approach to Ethics and Morals.” This subtitle and the resulting focus on relationships attempted to diffuse controversies over the feminine and maternal labels; however, it still ignored underlying power dynamics. Criticism of Noddings include references to uni-directional caring, the one caring, and the cared-for (Hoagland, 1990). The language of caring is problematic in part because of the way caring has been interpreted and measured.

For many educators, caring involves seeing beyond difference, with a particular emphasis on treating all students the same. Educators also care about the curriculum itself, which is visible in the many conversations regarding skills and content needed for mandated standardized tests. Educational research in teacher training is often focused on the achievement gap, and this is supported by test score discrepancies between different racial populations (Fensham & Cumming, 2013; Jiméneza, Nixon, & Zapedac, 2017; Warne, Price, & Yoon, 2014; Wasserberg, 2017). In attempting to improve student success, schools focus on test preparation and ignore socio-cultural contributing factors. Valenzuala’s (1997) study of teachers and Mexican-American youth criticizes the politics of caring, where education subtracts cultural resources from marginalized student populations in the effort to create sameness and a level playing field. This results in students' subjugation into normative institutionalized caring practices and policies that label red flag behaviors as at-risk. In doing so, caring educators fail to look at the broader social structures at play and their power as a teacher to reinforce and perpetuate feelings of neglect. Rolon-Dow (2005) also problematizes the contradictory perspectives of caring in her
study of Latina school girls. The traditional lens of caring does not disrupt or redress unjust learning conditions, such as the lack of representation for marginalized students within the curriculum itself. Some researchers continue the work of Noddings’ critics, redefining the concept to critical caring in relationships, policies, and practices in schools to address academic alienation and cultural isolation (Cooper, 2014; Schussler, 2006). Current critical caring school reforms propose that authentic caring involves seeking to know the additional contexts of student lives to engage transcultural student needs (Bass, 2018; Tichor-Wagner, 2016). In this study, each student expressed the harm created because no one seemed to care about anything beyond getting them through high school. While they succeeded academically, a measure of Noddings' concept of caring, participants did not experience the critical caring practices that would have made them feel known. This repeated idea was everpresent at all phases of the interview process and complicated students knowing of themselves as well.

Identity: Assigned Self, Questioning Self, True Self

Participants' expressions of self involved acknowledging assigned, adopted, intersecting, overlapping, and contradicting stereotypes and cultural norms. This complicated process was extended by trans specific emotional, physical, and legal transitions. The poems in this section portray identity development through contextual stories of the path to self-discovery within the entanglements and relationships of home and school. These trans voices speak of identity in intersectional ways as they express finding themselves amongst and between others' influences and stigma. This multilayered approach of constructing trans identity is reflected in research that has used the intersectionality model as a means of showing how various intersecting and oppressive structures can serve conversely and concurrently (Burnes & Chen, 2012; Denton, 2016; Kumashiro, 2001). The participants also provided insight into conceding to and resisting
cultural norms and a culture of coercive assimilation within personal, public, physical, and mental spaces. The first two poems share the title *Pictures* and their struggles to maintain an internal conception of gender within the confines of others’ expectations.

**JEM: PICTURES**
I hated seeing these; most are from before
I started figuring out that I was trans
THEY always made ME get that haircut

I look like a typical American boy nerd with glasses
I didn't know I wanted long hair
THEY always made ME get that haircut

I remember once playing at grandma's house,
I played with Legos, and then with dolls
THEY teased, "YOU'RE a girl!"

I held on to that insecurity about being feminine
I mean turns out THEY were right, but that's beside the point

Jem’s self-captioning of “before” pictures highlight the tenuous relationship between inter and intrapersonal perceptions of appearance, gender expression, and gender identity. Her poem reveals how others' aggressive messages of difference and their corresponding labels, whether accurate or not, created both hesitancy and insecurity, which made being true to herself challenging. In the next poem, Usnavi also reflects on how hair or gendered clothing is attached to perceptions of feminine or masculine traits. Despite these cultural norms, Usnavi always felt that he existed between the binaries, choosing to express gender in androgynous ways.

**USNAVI: PICTURES**
I used to have hair all the way down to MY butt
I refused to cut MY hair
I only didn’t ever want to, because everyone would tell ME
I should cut it

I didn’t even like long hair
I thought it was too feminine, so
I wore it in a braid and then,
I could always split the end in half to look like a mustache
I think the hair was maybe something to hide behind
I know some people will look back at their old self and think, oh, that’s gross
I don't want to think about old ME, but then
I look back at MY old self and realize

I wasn’t that bad, not a super girly girl or super tomboyish
I was always somewhere in between
I was androgynous, like in the middle, except for one picture
I was wearing a blue dress

I don't like to see myself in dresses, but other times,
I went from having super long hair to a ponytail to short
I like seeing those changes
I don’t think the pictures are like negative, nor fully positive

I don't know the word to describe it
I guess just like cathartic
I think it felt like remembering a bad memory, but something that
I’ve gotten over

Usnavi’s gender expression choices, such as refusing to cut his hair and playfully fashioning it
into a mustache, are moments of empowerment and a challenge to existing gender norms.

Both Usnavi and Jem highlight the conflicts surrounding assigned gender identity expectations
for trans youth. In the next two poems, *Phase* and *The Grey Area*, Grant and Grantaire relay an
inner dialogue and questioning of self that resulted from the distress and discomfort within their
physical bodies.

*GRANT: A PHASE*
I was called a loser and a tomboy as a child
I was continuously told; it was just a phase, something that
I'd grow out of it
I would listen to this, and MY head wanted not to agree
I went to sleep,
I prayed to God
I said, "Please God, I don't ask for much, but can
I, please wake up to be a boy?"

I woke up, nothing changed, and MY heart would break
I was ashamed of MY feelings
I never voiced THEM out loud
I became more guarded, more depressed, and more isolated
I didn't even understand why
I was thinking about these things
I never even heard of anyone feeling like ME
I never heard of the term transgender

I thought
I must be crazy, and if
I told anyone
I'd be labeled a freak and thrown out
I know now that
I'm not the only person in the world that felt this way
I take comfort in that, but back then
I was alone and afraid

Grant’s bedtime prayers reveal how childhood teasing and harassment left him, wishing that he could change. His fears of being ostracized and not having the language to frame his identity led to self-imposed isolation. Internal and external messages are expressed as collective contributors to the delayed development and discovery of Grant’s trans identity. In the next poem, Grantaire also describes the heteronormative messages that impacted their behavior, dress, and self-image.

GRANTAIRE: THE GREY AREA
I was a very feminine girl
I presented that way for a long time
I think until the tail end of puberty

I was very proud of MY body
I never had great self-confidence, but
I was confident enough to go damn,
I have curves

I started exploring with gender and then coming out,
I went right into the super, super masculine camp
I think a lot of people do, to avoid a gray area
I don't want to be this, so instead, be the exact opposite

I know that it did take a while to realize
I don't have to do that because
I’m not super happy, trying to conform to that stereotype
I don’t need to be more outwardly validated
Grantaire expresses the pressure of enculturation in his feminine resistance and conforms to the masculine to avoid uncertainty. Their feelings of gender dysphoria and the resulting extremes of gender expression ultimately led to a moment of empowerment as they vocalize a refusal to seek validation and a willingness to challenge the stereotypes that are forced upon them. Individual perceptions of gendered qualities (masculine/feminine) and others’ judgmental assumptions further complicate the internalized messages and the coming out process. Grantaire’s next poem describes a fragmentary coming out process and shifting identities over time.

**GRANTAIRE: COMING OUT**

I didn't formally come out; there was no one moment  
I remember my dad helped ME tie MY tie  
I felt a little weird, but  
I kinda just brushed it off

I felt like it kind of came in little bits, that  
YOU start with one thing and then  
YOU might move to another thing  
YOU know, over the years like little lights that went off

I came out as bisexual in eighth grade to friends  
I have a vivid memory of Roosevelt Field Mall  
I was sitting on the second floor of Macy's rug section  
I remember specifically how

I had built it up irrationally  
MY hands shaking and sweating  
My lips mumbling something about liking girls  
MY friends curious, who do YOU like, the person, not the gender

I came out to MY mom next; it sounds cliché but  
SHE is MY best friend  
SHE was an integral part of ME coming out as trans  
SHE noticed something was wrong

My uncle is gay, and MY mom was a little oblivious  
SHE likes to tell the story of when HER brother came out, that  
SHE had a crush on HIS best friend, and asked does YOUR best friend know?  
SHE didn’t realize THEY were dating, so it was funny

I came out to MY dad too, and then retracted it,
I said trans man and then non-binary
I know it was hard for HIM to wrap HIS head around
MY family just is never going to click in the same way MY mom does

The acceptance of friends and family is an essential aspect of disclosure and coming out for Grantaire. Their friends, who were the first to know, provided an unmistakable and significant realization, that liking a person is about more than gender. Their approval and encouragement gave Grantaire the confidence to tell their parents. Grantaire also reveals the frustrations of having family members, particularly his father, who may never fully understand.

In the next poem, Grant also focuses on his parents. His coming out poem provides additional historical context and portrays political forces that prolonged his journey to expressing his true self. In the years between two different US president terms, Grant describes losing a high school dream because of national laws regarding transgender individuals serving in the military.

**GRANT: THE MILITARY AND COMING OUT 2**
I think it was another form of conformity, the uniform again
I think it also was another closet, but
I was safe; Obama said that transgender people can serve
I needed to come out

I started working that summer with
MY father in the city, and on the phone,
I saw Trump said transgender people weren’t allowed to serve
I just remember thinking, “What am I going to do?”
I had been in the closet MY entire life, now another three years?

I knew who I was finally and
I can't lie, even a lie of omission
I went back to college and over to my cadre and
I told them about being transgender
I did want to continue and didn’t want it to be awkward, but after that

I was told I could stay in civilian classes, but no more of
MY physical training or lab exercises
I wasn’t going to get any contracts or scholarships
I walked out of the armory, thinking,
I don’t have a purpose anymore
I felt like I didn’t have a future
I sank into a depression
I stopped going to classes
I started lying to my parents, but
I just couldn’t figure out what I was supposed to say

I was very suicidal
MY mom was on the phone asking if
I was okay and
I remember saying,
“I’m not okay.”

I know SHE was angry,
I wasn’t telling the truth
I should be paying attention in class
I heard HER say
I was being pulled out of school

Grant recalls considering his options after realizing that being trans meant losing his dreams of a military career. His use of the words lie, lying, and truth reveal an ethical dilemma. Grant could conceal his identity and have a military future, but doing so would entail concealing his true self and transgressing his principles. This realization influenced self-harm behavior; by internally directing aggression, Grant felt there was no point in attending class and admits contemplating suicide.

Usnavi also expressed coming out as a turbulent time, especially coping with different levels of parental support. In Usnavi’s COMING OUT poem, he attempts to justify both parents' hurtful behaviors as expressions of initial apprehension, misguided love, or generational ignorance.

**USNAVI: COMING OUT**
I came out in tenth grade; it was a big year,
I told my mom about everything
I told her I was bi, depressed, and trans,
I needed help and
I needed to get therapy
SHE wasn’t really accepting at first, but eventually
SHE actually took care of all the legal stuff and
SHE handled the name change, but when
SHE tries to explain it,
SHE tends to word it as a “different lifestyle.”
SHE’s not wrong, it is different, but it's just ME

HE's a little worse, My dad
HE never says anything about it that’s rude
HE usually just tries to avoid talking about it
HE started crying when he found out, because
HE just kind of felt like
HE was losing HIS daughter

I’m not an only child
I have an older brother
I never really felt close to HIM
I never even had a big talk with him about it
I came out in the middle of HIS senior year
I don’t think he really had to deal with it much

They’re all supportive in MY family but,
They don't really understand it as well as
They should

Usnavi rationalizes his mother’s use of the phrase “different lifestyle” and his father’s mourning of a daughter. His declaration of familial support contradicts his frustration with the limitations of their understanding and final determination that they should know. Adam also describes in his poem the complexities of coming out to parents as trans.

**ADAM: COMING OUT I**
I started off high school looking pretty feminine
I slowly incorporated more masculine clothing and hairstyles
I just kind of cut MY hair short
I was 14 going on 15

I was a little nervous to do everything all at once
I just kind of like did it gradually if that makes sense, for
MY own comfort level and so
MY parents wouldn't freak out too much

I told MY mom, and then
MY mom told
MY dad after HE got home from work
I was in an argument with MY mom
I didn't want to wear makeup, and
I just got into explaining why and then
SHE was just like, no, YOU’RE not, YOU’RE a girl, YOU were born this way

I got the whole; it's a phase thing several times
THEY were just like, don't tell anyone at school

I remember more of the negative things
THEY said, "You're not going to be like Chaz Bono, or are you?”
THEY said things like, “I might as well drive my car into the ocean.”
THEY said things like, “I knew a masculine lesbian, now she has a husband and kids.”
THEY didn't remember that
THEY denied saying all of those things
THEY were like, "We never said that."

I found a lot of resources online
I was like, "Hey, here's a video. Do YOU want to watch it?"
I was like, "Hey, do YOU want to come with ME and do MY therapy session?"
I'm just like, “Well, here's an educational resource, and here's some more.”
I'll just bombard YOU with them until YOU pay attention

I waited about two years before
THEY started calling ME by
MY name, the timeline's a little fuzzy there
MY therapist knew a lot about the community
HE wasn't trans himself, but
HE helped educate THEM

MY mom helped with
MY name paperwork and filling it out
THEY have been helpful like financially with
THEIR insurance so
I can stay on it and then
I could get hormones.

For Adam, disclosure accompanied repeated verbal aggression and a lack of acceptance.

Over a two-year period, these invalidating conversations were met with self-empowerment as

Adam pushed his parents to learn and understand his trans identity. Adam fully transitioned with medical treatment hormones, gender expression, appearance, clothing, and name and pronoun
changes. He attributes that to his parents' help with legal paperwork, financial support, and health insurance.

Coming out as trans often involves dealing with an identity that is misunderstood, disrespected, and denied. The previous poems express the social and personal impact of disclosure. Jem and Grantaire's poems end this first section and provide insight into how challenging it can be to clearly define their trans identity and their true self to others.

**Jem: Defining Trans**

I'm trans  
it's an umbrella term  
It encapsulates anyone that feels that

THEY don't match  
THEIR assigned birth gender

some people experience dysphoria,  
I do in MY case

some are binary,  
some are non-binary

Sexuality is different, but  
THEY think of genitalia and  
THEY are linked, but it's separate

In this poem, Jem attempts to clarify what being trans means. Here, the pronouns they and there are intentionally puzzling. In one stanza, they/their describes a person who is trans and in the other, they identifies people who confuse gender identity with sexual orientation. Grantaire's poem, *The Umbrella*, extends Jem's definition of trans and the [mis]understandings of the transgender identity.

**Grantaire: The Umbrella**

Nobody's high school experience is attached to one part of  
THEIR identity, so even though there is a core set of experiences,  
like dysphoria, name and pronoun, and revolving gender expression  
MY identity is still made up of many parts  
MY high school experience being trans, it's very much intertwined with  
MY personality and also
MY mental health struggles

I came out as a trans man to ease people in, then
I was like no, so
I'm doing this to make other people happy
I'm gonna choose a different name for
MYself because that's what it should be
I had to kind of ease back into the non-binary label
I guess trans is right, technically

I mean, nonbinary is an umbrella term as well.
I identify as nonbinary and also trans
I do, some don't
MY opinion is pretty much that trans is just an umbrella term for
anybody who's not cisgender, for
anybody who's not comfortable with what
THEY were labeled at birth

I think there is a distinction between transgender and trans, when
YOU say trans,
YOU're not necessarily transgender.
I've seen transgender usually denoting either
somebody who was assigned male at birth or
somebody was assigned female at birth, and switching over
I think it is very complicated, the term transgender in the trans community

I know that it is used as a medical term
My medical records say transgender man
My doctors know that's not
MY identity, but for legal purposes, that's what it has to say
I know it's not necessarily just those two like the male-female categories
MY birth certificate has an X because
I'm lucky to be born just over the county line

Grantaire chooses not to start with technical terms or definitions but instead provides a warning that being trans should not obscure or limit other aspects of their identity. They describe a core set of trans experiences but then continue to explain their trans identity's nuances. Grantaire also shared the different contexts of transgender and trans, distinctions that they admit are complicated. Like the others in this first section, their poem expresses the desire to discover and embrace a true self and trans identity within and beyond labels that are simultaneously validated and rejected at home and school.
The poems in this section explore participant experiences as they arrive at and adopt their trans identity. Their experiences confirm existing studies of trans youth that report harassment and exclusion (Kosciw et al., 2018; Orr. et al., 2015; Johns et al., 2019). The singular representation of trans students as victims estranged from peers and family disregards other legitimate aspects of the trans high school experience. Additionally, the summative definition of trans as a conflict between gender identity and gender assigned at birth limits and oversimplifies discourse. Critical conversations regarding identity formation and representation require a reframing of the ways trans students are acknowledged and supported (Burke, 2019). Each of the participants provided complex accounts of an identity defamed, denied, and desired.

The (Dys)functions of High School

This next section's poetry documents academic, social, physical, and emotional functions of school that are lacking or non-existent. Participants describe dysfunctional and inoperative models that present additional difficulties for trans student attempts to socialize with peers. In *Girlfriend*, Jem attempts to adapt and blend into heteronormative and heterosexual norms forcing enculturation or internalized congruence with the culture and social pressures surrounding him.

*JEM: GIRLFRIEND*

I had one friend, a girl
SHE lived very close to MY house
SHE was MY friend for a long time, even before pre-K

I noticed the girls more in elementary school too
TEACHERS made lines separating boys and girls
I wanted to be part of the girls more than the boys

Boys made fun of ME and some
Girls did too
THEY called HER MY girlfriend

I told HER I can't be around YOU
I told HER I hated HER
THEY still made fun of US
I finally, in high school, just gave in
I told HER I don't love YOU, but let's date
THEY think we are together anyway

I took HER into the basement
I played video games
SHE was MY GIRLFRIEND

I would walk HER home from the bus
I told HER to give ME a hug and a kiss
SHE said on the cheek

I pressured HER into kissing ME on the lips
I was a horny teenager
I was the typical guy who pushes for more

I tried to shove MY tongue in HER mouth
I actually scared HER a little
THEY weren’t even there to watch

I treated HER like shit and broke up with HER
I became the asshole
THEY treated ME like garbage

I can be the asshole too
I really regret it now
She still hates ME even after all these years

Jem gave in to the masculine gender mold and used aggressive kissing to dominate and maintain status. These attempts to fit in are initially rationalized and ultimately left Jem more isolated. While other participants describe subtle shifts resulting from learned enculturation, such as clothing or hairstyles, Jem’s overt behaviors illustrate the desire to adhere to learned cultural values. In School, Jem conveys the emotional toll of belonging in a setting devoid of physical or psychological safe spaces. Jem’s encounters with adults and peers in school contributed to a high school experience marked by extreme behavior shifts that were a simultaneous experience of being subjected to pervasive social norms and efforts to defy heteronormativity.

JEM: SCHOOL
I was a robot, no emotion
I put happiness on lockdown,
I was "too sensitive," and THEY made fun of ME

I'd get angry and yell
Teachers said I was “becoming a problem.”
I needed attention

I bit MY arm, blamed someone else, and cried
The teacher said, "YOU get up now."
The principal said, “YOU’re OK.”

I was wasn't OK, but no one really cared
The teachers just didn’t want to deal with it
The principal just wanted to walk around the hall and say hi

I was bullied a lot
I wanted teachers to notice, but not the spotlight
THEY would have just had a bigger target to bully ME

I tried to be an extrovert in ninth grade
I was loud and very high energy
THEY just found ME more annoying

I joined Mathletes and Future Business Leaders of America
I didn’t really do anything
THEY had some fundraisers; that’s about it

I learned that I was better off being an introvert
I heard guidance counselors say do good in school, go to college, and have a future
Adults stopped If I was quiet, and MY grades never dropped

I made a few friends,
I tried with MY tiny friend group a different name
THEY were cis, some of THEM were exploring sexuality

I started to explore at home by MYself
I tried lipstick and a ponytail, on the computer
I learned trans stuff and did research

I didn’t go to prom, none of MY friends were going
I would’ve ended up standing around doing nothing
THEY didn’t really care

I started exploring a little bit more at the end of high school
I decided after graduation,
MY fresh start would be college
Jem does not identify specific adults or peers but instead draws attention to an underlying culture that convinced Jem she had no choice but to wait until after high school to be acknowledged. This culture of heteronormative oppression left Jem resigned to the path of least resistance. Adopting silence and choosing isolation helped to create an invisible existence where she could avoid hostility and harassment. On her own, Jem was also free to explore gender identity without judgment or interference.

Usnavi expresses similar frustrations with his teachers and guidance counselor as well. His poem also brings to light issues concerning school curriculum, school assemblies, and GSAs.

**USNAVI: HIGH SCHOOL 2**
I was a bit of a pain when it came to MY schedule
I saw MY guidance counselor a lot.
I knew that kids in honors classes would have more understanding
I was on the principal’s honor roll and really good at the cello too
I felt they helped me prove
I was a good child, but in class

I knew more than MY teachers knew.
I said, “It’s not a choice” in MY psychology class
I remember talking about some LGBTQ topics
I think it was in AP government and Supreme Court cases and
I know we glossed over it in health
I even argued with an English teacher about using THEY

I guess school over emphasized bullying or drugs, not MY real life
I started seeing the social worker, but
I never felt I could really go to HER for much
I felt SHE was very on the surface, nice
I could tell SHE was just being nice; it was HER job
I knew SHE never genuinely cared

I wonder how SHE became the GSA advisor
I could see like, SHE knew some stuff, but not enough
I joined for a little bit, but
I didn’t feel like WE ever even talked about anything LGBTQ
I sort of gave up, not bothering to fight over bathrooms
I had it better than a lot of MY friends

I know that it could have been much worse
I had to deal with bullying and passive-aggressive comments
I wasn’t literally being beaten up
I’m not sure if degrees of damage matter
I just know that I was suicidal and

I think it could have been better
I want to say different isn't inherently bad
I know how some things present as an inconvenience
I need THEM to realize it might mean the whole world to someone else
I know that THEY have the power to change lives
I wish more had been done for ME

Usnavi perceives educators, like his guidance counselor, teachers, and GSA advisor, as
disinterested and uniformed. Across classes, Usnavi describes limited opportunities to learn
about or discuss trans issues and disingenuous school assemblies that did little to improve school
culture. Usnavi’s efforts to resist heteronormative bias and assumptions by correcting the gender
choice paradigm stands out amongst his listing of classes that lacked authentic representation.
He questions the harassment levels he experienced in relation to others that he knows face overt
threats of aggression and violence. Usnavi’s ultimate resignation and contemplation of suicide is
followed by questioning how “it could have been better.”

Grantaire’s *A Proper Education* reflects Usnavi’s awareness of a curriculum that
promotes and maintains binary views of gender and sexuality. Grantaire focuses on the implicit
prohibition of sex education in schools and risks related to turning to the internet for answers.

*GRANTAIRE: A PROPER EDUCATION*
I remember knowing from ninth or tenth grade on,
I knew for a fact that Shakespeare had a history of being bisexual
YOU know,
WE could have really talked about that in Intro to Shakespeare or English

I remember in biology
WE vaguely studied physical sexuality
YOU know, there's a difference between sexes
I remember labeling the physical character characteristics

I recall talking about chromosomes, but
I just think it was kind of brushed over
I mean, of course, like most people MY age,
I learned a lot of stuff on the internet

I never assumed that it was something that could be talked
I always assumed that it was, that was a topic for a health class
I remember sex education was a small part of
MY half-year health course in tenth grade

like everything was assumed to be heteronormative and cis
like, occasionally, they mentioned specifically just gay people, just one type of sex.
I had health twice
I took the other half senior year

We didn’t talk about sex at all instead,
We focused on nutrition, substance abuse, and drinking
I think the teacher thought WE would misbehave, so
HE tried to stay away from the topic

I think it makes the topic more taboo
WE were forced to find alternative sources
I think if a school doesn’t provide a proper education
YOU're going to turn to sources that may not be the most reliable

Grantaire’s criticism of the lack of a proper education reveals his frustration with learning gaps
that failed to recognize, represent, and actively silenced their needs. The poems provided above
are placed in the first grouping of The Dysfunction of High School poems and reveal a troubling
erasure of trans voices. The next series of poems extend school function concerns to specific
aspects of the transitioning process and students' additional trans-specific needs. All three of
Adam’s poems are placed together to detail school-specific transitions that were incredibly
challenging during his high school years.

\textit{ADAM: NAME 2}
I started the name change process, then
I started telling people
MY name and pronouns in twelfth grade
I could be MY authentic self

I went to see MY guidance counselor
HE said HIS wife’s school also wouldn't change names
HE said THEY get the first initial on the student ID cards instead of the full name
I told him that’s great for some of THEIR names, but what if
THEY didn't keep the same initials

I told teachers I'm here, but call ME a different name
I assumed the pronouns would follow and it would be implied, but no
THEY might have been focused on other things or
THEY didn't particularly care

THEY refused to change it and
MY birth name was put on MY diploma for "legal" reasons
THEY said school records and government records must be aligned
THEY compromised after I kept asking, so
MY chosen name was used in the yearbook and at graduation.

Adam was prevented by school policy from using his affirmed name and pronouns. His
guidance counselor’s response and the suggestion of using an initial was a half-hearted attempt
of acknowledgment. The school's refusal to allow changes on the diploma based on alignment
with government records and legality did not stop Adam from continuing to demand his right to
be spoken to and treated according to their gender identity. The next two poems report Adam’s
recollections of bathroom policy restrictions.

ADAM: THE BATHROOM INCIDENT 1
I was probably like the first one of the trans category
I tried to ask to use the men's bathroom
I remember talking to the dean about using the bathrooms
I was told to change for gym and go to the bathroom in the nurse's office

HE mentioned a staff bathroom but
HE never told ME where the staff bathroom was
HE made small talk, mentioning a student who was a drag queen
HE didn’t know that was different

I explained that some might do drag and identify as trans
I said that’s gender expression, expression versus identity

In high school, Adam was provided access to an alternate bathroom in place of using the one that
matched his gender identity. In speaking with the dean regarding bathroom access, Adam
becomes the educator and must clarify distinctions between gender expression and gender
identity. In both Adam’s preferred name and bathroom requests, educators did not attempt to
genuinely and respectfully protect rights. Adam’s final poem recounts prom and another bathroom incident.

**ADAM: THE BATHROOM INCIDENT 2**

I went to prom,  
I didn’t go with MY girlfriend  
SHE had already established a stag friend date, so  
SHE went with a group of friends  
I brought a friend from outside of school  
I mostly hung out with MY girlfriend  
I hung out with MY date obviously, too

I had fun, well parts of it.  
I don't remember what it was called it, but  
THEY had an after-prom at Dave and Buster  
THEY figured It was an incentive to not go out and get drunk  
I didn't want to be wearing a suit all night, so  
I went to go change in the bathroom and put my pajamas on  
I was told I couldn't go into the men's bathroom by this one teacher.

I had seen him in school, whenever  
I had to be in the computer lab for a class  
HE was like walking out  
HE said, "YOU can't come in here."  
I said, "Where else am I supposed to go?  
I'm in a suit.  
I identify as male.”

I guess I didn't pass well enough.  
I ended up changing in the janitor's closet cause because  
I didn't want to go into the women's restroom  
I never brought it up at school; it was the day before graduation.  
I didn't really say anything  
I was just like, why bother with taking action  
I'm going to be out of here tomorrow

Adam faced prom discrimination, not because of his attire or date, but because a teacher chaperone denied bathroom access. Adam’s attempts to reason with the teacher threatened what had been a fun night. This incident went beyond earlier half-hearted attempts to accommodate, and Adam recalls changing in the janitor’s closet before rejoining the after-prom activities. Adam’s high school experience was a period of simultaneous self-advocacy and resignation.
In the next poem, Usnavi also touches upon the bathroom and other gendered conflicts that included finding a means of escape as a coping strategy. For Usnavi, spending half of the school day in an alternate setting was a preferred isolation from hetero and cisnormative oppression.

**USNAVI: HIGH SCHOOL**

MY high school was actually a split experience  
I told you that I came out in tenth grade and  
I was mostly alone; it was a bad time.  
My main high school was only part of my school day

I went to vocational school in eleventh and twelfth grade  
MY escape, that’s what it was and  
MY classes were about computer animation  
I know it was a better experience

MY honors classes and music weren’t enough  
I was kind of hurt by people in regular high school  
I came out as trans and felt  
MYself being ignored or called weird

I never really used the bathrooms in school.  
MY fear was the judgment of others  
MY preference was to wait till I got home  
I was stuck, just like the locker room

My teachers also told ME that  
I couldn’t change MY birth name  
I knew that wasn’t true  
MY parents didn’t need to give permission

I left campus for six periods of the day to go to  
MY other school, where I used  
MY preferred name and pronouns  
I noticed that no one seemed to care much about it

Usnavi’s vocational school engagement for six out of nine school periods each day provided a setting free of harassment or teacher refusals to use his preferred name and pronouns. Usnavi also valued the alternate school's computer animation focus, a skill that he felt would be of use in
the future. Unlike Adam, Usnavi struggled with self-advocacy and chose to avoid potential barriers such as using the bathroom or locker room whenever possible.

Grantaire, like Usnavi, spent part of high school in an alternate program. However, they viewed the experience as a punishment for seeking supportive adults and resisting trans oppressive school policies. Grantaire’s school denied their right to be called by something other than birth name and refused to accommodate their bathroom request.

GRANTAIRE: DEAD NAME
I think SHE was like a social worker,
SHE was like finishing HER master's or something.
I talked to HER about coming out and being trans
SHE noticed in the office a board with birthdays on it
I knew it still had MY dead name on it, and
SHE's like, do YOU want to go upstairs and change it?
I didn't feel like I needed to be official about it and
SHE's like, come on, let's write it and erased the dead name
I didn't want to get in trouble for it
SHE ended up leaving the school, but wow
I knew it meant a lot

I was able to write down MY name in MY own hand,
I don't really like the name deadname, but
I also don't like the name birth name
I like given name; MY parents gave ME that name
I think of this phrase deadname like,
YOU can't keep any of who YOU were or
YOU have to let that person die to become who
YOU are, which is so sad
YOU can still carry both

This experience with a school social worker was a rare moment of acknowledgment and empowerment. Grantaire’s writing of the preferred name on a birthday bulletin board would later be brought up during an intervention meeting. The social worker who was serving her temporary clinician period was not at that meeting. At that meeting, the name incident and bathroom safety would be framed as justification for a split schedule across two high school settings.
TRANS ACTION AND POETIC JUSTICE

GRANTAIRE: MY VOICE
It always surprises me hearing, MY own voice
I think a lot of students feel like
THEY won't be heard or that
THEY, the teacher, won't care

I know what that feels like, so
I'm more willing to, to listen to what
THEY have to say, but
THEY use scare tactics, “This is what happens if YOU do not listen.”

I heard the assistant principal say
I couldn’t use the boy’s bathroom or change MY name
THEY tried to say it wasn't feasible like logistically
THEY said the school board would have to address it

I would want to go to the bathroom, but the only one available to
ME, quote-unquote safely, was the girl's room.
I didn't feel comfortable there.
I felt like somebody would call ME and go, “Why are YOU here?

I have such a visceral memory of whipping the paper out saying,
“I can, actually.”
“I’m legally allowed to use the bathroom and name I want.”
“I don’t want to get lawyers involved.”

I couldn’t afford it, but THEY didn’t know that
I had a problem that THEY didn't want to deal with
THEY should have had the ability to deal with that
THEY were going to have to figure it out

I know that I would have pushed even further
MY "emotional troubles,”; that was the wording THEY used
I came out trans, and then it was YOU’re just acting out
I mean, really slapping on a label and a different school

I was only in high school for a couple of periods a day after that
I definitely felt some loss, but it was easier to let it go
I mean, it was only across the street, but it was still a significant otherness
YOU didn’t belong, not only ME but for anybody who was in the program

Grantaire’s penultimate expression of personal agency in high school involved providing papers
to justify and support his trans rights. These papers would be ignored, and under the guise of
protecting Grantaire from stigma and discrimination, a partial day alternate program left them
feeling further alienated. Grantaire expresses forced isolation and feelings of otherness as a result of exclusionary school decisions. Like the others in this section, Grantaire’s poems demonstrate how the trans identity complicated and heightened hostile and dysfunctional high school experiences.

High schools are often described as institutions of learning committed to college and career readiness. In 1999, Wren’s description of a hidden curriculum questioned the unintended norms and values transferred to students. For trans students, what Wren defines as unintentional is part of implicit cisnormative and heteronormative culture that stigmatizes and silences. This section's poems provide insight into how schools enculturate and perpetuate traditional expectations of gender and social norms. Extant research includes studies of formal curriculum shifts to more inclusive representations of gender (Boyd & Bereiter, 2017; Cerezo & Bergfeld, 2013). While these studies provide critical examinations of authentic and meaningful representation, they fail to reveal the messy contradictions of educational policy and practice.

Agency: Trans Actions and the Call for Change

Participants expressed acts of individual agency that were both intentional, causal, and reactionary in the complicated contexts of individual and broader social influences. Their retrospective accounts of high school experiences provide a point to initiate important conversations and reconsider the language of [trans] gender and trans action. This final section of poetic transcription joins all five trans participants' voices to show how vital discourse is and their shared commitment to trans advocacy and change. Change that includes the creation of trans representative and celebrated spaces in schools. Change that must be based on a framework of multiple points of prevention and intervention (Fisher et al., 2008). These
participants call out existing practices as a farce of LGBTQ inclusive theater that is superficially addressed or an addendum to the school year.

JOINING OUR VOICES AND DEMANDING CHANGE
I know what it’s like to be disenfranchised
I didn’t really have anyone to talk about it to
I’m a kid trying to figure this out myself
I tried to advocate for myself more
THEY were just like, never mind, no need to change

YOU know not having someone to turn to, to help navigate
MY trauma and pain, that's what drove
ME to try to help somebody else
I do like advocating for MYSELF and others
I mean, if an opportunity arises to educate

YOU never know like who's going to be in the room
YOU never know who is trans or knows someone who is trans
I think being visible is the most important way to help on
MY own terms on
MY own time and publicly in order to help others

I am trans; it’s not the only aspect of who I am; if
YOU are only dealing with that
YOU are anticipating that one factor is causing these issues
YOU need to pay attention to individual students
YOU need to realize that there are mental health issues at play

I think that's the big picture, working with and reading
YOUR students and going, “What do THEY need?”
YOUR students, “Do THEY know who to go to or have a safe space?
YOU know, what kind of space should the classroom or school be?
YOU should look at the building, the offices, the classrooms

MY school’s guidance office was just college banners
YOU should think about what that says
I think I remember a few posters that the GSA put up (once)
YOU should think about how that feels
I mean, how about school events

YOU know, how is one bullying presentation going to work
WE did the Day of Silence in MY school
WE had a GSA bake sale fundraiser, all in June
YOU should think about what it says if the few events
YOUR school holds are sequestered to the shortest and last month
THEY function within individual politics, personal morals, or public image
THEY need educating, start at the college level, teaching teachers
THEY could pair an organization, like what is done here, with schools
THEY need to give the teachers who are already teaching a knowledge base
THEY need to give the students and parents the terminology too

YOU know too many times the voice is an adult voice
YOU know, maybe the voice needs to be an adult voice partnered with
YOU know, someone who's dealt with it and goes through the same situations
YOU know someone who has thought about how lessons can embrace US

I wish there had been a judgment-free zone that included US
I wish that THEY had those things, so
I could have transitioned earlier and
I would have been proud to use MY name
I wouldn’t have been so scared

YOU KNOW, I think that would have changed everything

Within the poem's lines is a list of deliberate changes that provide a framework of multiple
simultaneous strategies to improve schools. While the poem suggests training as a starting point,
there is also a warning that true social change and empowerment must include a partnership with
the voices of those oppressed and the outside agencies that have successfully respected and
embraced the trans community.

**Discussion of Themes**

In presenting a separate discussion section, it is my intention to showcase, honor, and
amplify participants' voices that they may precede my analysis. Although I discussed earlier
finding a place for my voice in this study, interlaying thematic analysis between each
participant's experiences would distract and detract from “feeling with” versus “feeling about”
the poems and ultimately limit the voices they represent. Despite the challenges of voice that
were a constant concern, there emerged themes. *Recursive Trans Negotiations*, the first theme,
corresponds directly to the research question's emphasis on the relationship between identity,
agency, and school function. The second, *Personal and Political Trans Experiences*, underscores
the connections between trans student personal experience and broader social and political structures. The final two themes, *The Failings of Language* and *Shame, Avoidance, and Silence* report trans-specific language conflicts resulting from social conventions, categorization, and non-verbal or silent cues.

**Theme One: Recursive Trans Negotiations**

Negotiating society's heteronormative intersections of school, parent, or peer involves similar and distinct recursive patterns. Institutional structures and surrounding environments frequently limit individual agency. Research tends to ignore student agency by emphasizing social contexts that create multiple agency authors in their lives (Hansen, 2010; Prout 2000; Oswell 2013). Some suggest that social structures are modified and transformed through agency (Alderson and Yoshida 2016; Archer 2003). Participants' acts of agency contradict and challenge the values of the institutions that surround and limit them. Trans-specific expressions of agency shared by the participants include gender expression, coming out, social and or medical transitioning, name and pronoun changes, and self-advocacy. Facing the high costs of violating gender heteronormativity, these students developed defensive, protective, and adaptive behaviors to survive and thrive despite their circumstances. Participants articulate recursive behavior patterns that involved empowerment, rationalizing, blending, enculturation, aggression, isolation, silencing, and resignation. These behaviors did not present as distinct, linear, or progressive categories. Instead, participants shifted in and through these behaviors while attempting to reconcile their identity from within and outside of privilege and oppression. To illustrate this, I created the following figure, imagining participants taking a mirror selfie that reflects, refracts, and reframes the self-image that they present to themselves and others.

Figure 8
Trans Navigations of Heteronormative Spaces

Note. This image represents distinct recursive and reflective patterns of behavior that frame identity for trans students.

To validate the creation of this figure, an explanation of the use and application of recursive is necessary. As an English teacher, I spend a portion of each year guiding students through the research writing process, which I describe as recursive, the complete opposite of a direct linear path or series of steps. I then take chalk and draw on the board a spiraling circle and a squiggly line to illustrate the process of research and recursive revisions. This lesson is inspired by Kurt Vonnegut’s (1999) admission that his master’s thesis, “The Shape of All Stories,” was rejected by the University of Chicago. His “prettiest contribution to culture” is a push against the traditional model of a plot triangle, embracing instead that “the shape of a given society’s stories is at least as interesting as the shape of its pots or spearheads.” Here lies the contradiction; while the participants' experiences were quite different, and I feared forcing an alignment, or universal experience, similar strands across the interviews could not be ignored.

To substantiate my choice to represent these shared transitions in the reoccurring pattern of a pensive human form, theories regarding recursive thinking and learning also contributed to the design of Figure 8. Social cognition theorists posit that human development is recursive and does not occur in stages (Corballis, 2014; Lesko, 2001). This suggests that similar thought
processes and actions repeatedly happen as we move from one context to another. Several research studies cite recursive thinking and the development of social cognition, understanding others' states of mind within our own thinking, as being critical to executive function and a person’s ability to deal with adversity. As the participants narrated their high school experiences, they reflected not only on the past but also how those experiences resulted from earlier childhood moments, impacted their current lives, and might help transform the future. Both reactionary and chosen behaviors occurred while negotiating the heteronormative spaces of school and home, and this was not experienced singularly but as a function of and feeding into the entire process.

This process resulted in part from an extended process of coming out involving heteronormative social conditioning and trans-specific factors. While there were distinct contextual differences across participants' stories regarding disclosure, they all expressed similar social and medical transitions. For example, several participants voiced frustrations with double puberty and physical changes that could not be reversed. Repeatedly, in interviews, participants expressed wishing they could have come out earlier to avoid as Adam explained, “I'm 22 and still live with acne. It's been bad acne for like ten years. It's a long time.” Jem was frustrated by specific masculine changes during his first puberty and couldn’t be reversed in the second. This is made more apparent for Jem when she compares herself to her sibling, “She’s a size small. She was female her whole life. I went through male puberty. I have wide shoulders that make me a size large.” Participants agree that coming out as trans involves an extended transitioning process that includes distinct personal, familial, and institutional discourse levels. In high school, these transitions involved simultaneous and at times distinct experiences of
empowerment, rationalizing, blending, enculturation, aggression, isolation, silencing, and resignation

**Theme Two: Personal and Political Trans Student Experiences**

The impact of social and political structures on personal lives is indisputable, and yet the legitimacy of individual personal stories and their ability to speak to broader cultural experience is often disputed. The origins of *the personal is political* is often attributed to Carol Hanisch (1969). Her essay argued that women's personal experiences were rooted in the politics of gender inequality and powerful social structures. At the time of publication, Hanisch criticized those that attributed feminist action as therapy. This belief failed to recognize that the personal becomes political when social injustices extend repeatedly, and consciousness is raised beyond the individual as something shared with others. The phrase trans action is intentional in this study to describe individual acts of agency in participant narratives and identify schools as an oppressive institutionalized structure that must be disrupted. Grantaire, Adam, and Usnavi recount moments of pedagogical activism. Their refusal to passively become victims is seen in the multiple and repeated situations in which they corrected their teachers' and administrators’ trans ignorance. For these participants, trans activism is about claiming their voice and advocating for change that extends to the entire school culture. In sharing the retrospective, personal, and lived experiences of trans students, an entry point is also provided for the voices of young people who are often excluded and disempowered from educational reform.

Grant and Jem’s experiences of opting out or avoidance might also be viewed as activism. The resistance and refusal to submit to gender and identity policing from a deficit standpoint might be viewed as causing social alienation or exclusion. Others might view their disengagement as typical teenage apathy. Youth activism is typically defined as developing
student voice or involvement in social change (Arthurs, 2018; Taines, 2014). Traditionally this is viewed from a top-down perspective concerning power, and even when the power dynamic is flipped, there is no inclusion of passive resistance as a means of empowerment. This behavior is often considered non-participation and has no place in the well known Hart (2013) Ladder of Young People’s Participation. For Grant and Jem choosing not to participate was a way of claiming what little power they felt by exercising their choice to disengage. Jem initially joined clubs in school but stop going choosing instead online gamer friends and the safety of experimenting with gender expression alone. Grant remembers a dance recital saying, “I told my mom I'm not doing the recital, I'm too uncomfortable, I don't like it, I look horrible.” Grant admits that even though he felt a little guilty, “it still felt really good to say no.” Often, disengagement is viewed as a negative in high school, but instead, it was conscious resistance, safety, empowerment, and agency for both Jem and Grant. Youth activism can take the form of collaboration between adults and students. Its meaning can also be expanded to include more nuanced forms of resistance that allow individuals to challenge existing power structures.

**Theme Three: The Failings of Language**

Language frustrations include finding the right words to convey meaning while embodying a highly debated identity and experience that defies classification into neat gender or sexual identity categories. While the LGBTQ umbrella has provided protection and equal rights across gender and sexual identities, it has equally created obscurity and confusion. Encapsulating transgender into this umbrella often creates a contradictory self-defining and minimizing self-identity. Transgender is also an umbrella term for a diverse grouping of sexual and gender identities. Reclaiming “queer” provides an additional troubling layer for many because of its associated stigma. Grant mentioned at our second meeting his dislike of queer,
stating, “it’s the same as when people try to reclaim the T-word, which I guess for context is "Tranny," and I don't like that.” The fluidity of the queer umbrella contradicts these labels; however, binary thinking cannot be ignored. Often trans students identify in the heteronormative binary, and an all or nothing perspective can become both limiting and exclusionary (Denton, 2016). Of the five participants, only Grantaire identified as non-binary; the others identify their gender identity as either male or female. These binary gender identities of man and woman were further complicated by passing as cisgender. All participants expressed a yearning and unease with the word passing and how others interpret their gender presentation. They were also unsure of how they defined this blending into the cisnornative. Grant sarcastically mentions having “the virtue of passing,” but it is apparent that while this may have created feelings of safety, it had not shielded him from his self-judgment. Language for each of these trans participants creates both external and internal confusion.

In Grantaire’s second interview, they brought up the frustrations of language, “not having the right words, not exactly being able to articulate meaning. It’s one of those situations where I know what I want to say, but this word doesn’t really fit, or it doesn’t really get a message across.” The complications of word meaning are further frustrated by connotations implied and the context and circumstances surrounding how words are used. As a researcher, I also struggled with language and meaning. Early in the doctoral journey, I would phrase goals around creating trans-inclusive schools and teaching tolerance when asked about this study. The trouble with this phrasing was that I was positioning myself as an “includer” and complicit in perpetuating the legacy and intolerance of a heteropatriarchal and oppressive system. This reflexive shift forced me to realize that good intentions often mask both explicit and covert practices. In the same way that Grantaire describes, “my most used function of Google docs is right-clicking and finding
synonyms.” I realized as they spoke that the failings of language are unavoidable, but they can be mitigated by critically examining and deconstructing the layers of meaning and contexts in which they are used.

**Theme Four: Shame, Avoidance, and Silence**

Language failures for trans youth extend beyond understanding word meaning to include an unvocalized silence that reveals troubling white racial socialization. This startling realization resulted from attempts to force an intersectional lens with a predominately white and/or trans(m) participant sample. One participant was Hispanic trans(m). Other participants varied regarding sexual orientation, and for two participants, gender identity differed, non-binary and trans(f).

Participants focused on gender identity, sexual identity, and relationship roles despite semi-structured interview questions covering identity factors. Usnavi, the only non-white participant, selected a pseudonym that brought up interesting connections with Hispanic communities' cultural assimilation in New York City. When asked follow-up questions about the significance of this choice, Usnavi focused on the opening number saying, “he finds out that his home is really in New York City it's like the sweetest little story.” Usnavi shifted the conversation away from cultural references, bringing up character traits, “He also was, despite being awkward, he would try to be confident, which is something I can relate to a lot. And he also has a very loving family and supporting friends, which I do have, but just because depression mind makes you think that you don't have those things.” This led to a discussion of Usnavi’s family. However, beyond a brief description of a trip to Mexico with an older brother and his father’s habit of staying at parties for too long, Usnavi directed conversations about identity to gender expression, disclosure, and transphobia.
The absence of meaningful conversations surrounding culture, language, and ethnicity continued as I reviewed each participant's transcripts. Grant spoke about diversity at his high school, which included “certain types of minorities… but, really, we were all white people and then a small number of Asian people.” An apology followed this comment, “You know I probably said a lot of racially insensitive things at that time. I'm not proud of it, but I'm going to own up to it.” At the time, I was too focused on providing Grant space to continue sharing that I failed to realize he had connected his comments with my Asian background. Looking back at the transcript, it was clear that Grant was preoccupied with appearing insensitive. This racial discomfort was a watershed moment for me, and suddenly within the interview transcripts, I saw an unexpected theme emerging. Participants each expressed an apologetic tone when discussing violence against trans people of color while minimizing their own trans experiences. They acknowledged that their experiences, while traumatic, were not nearly as tragic. Participants also emphasized their privilege and not having to deal with racism or physical violence.

These conversations or acknowledgments were still not really about race, and I wondered with recent events surrounding George Floyd’s death and Black Lives Matter why none of the interviews included any references to racism. While discussing my Vietnamese background, I realized that I framed myself as a student of color by using the words culture and diversity. Was I appropriating racism or being racist by adopting these terms as personal identifiers? Was I responsible for our collective racial silence? Silence, disengagement, or deracialized language is attributed to white racial socialization at home and school (Castagno, 2008; Hagerman, 2014; Hagerman, 2017). By re-examining participant narratives, troubling patterns emerged in what was said and what was not said. Silence or the absence of explicit racial conversations does not serve to create a more neutral or less racist space. Vague or superficial generalizations also do
very little to deconstruct or defuse white privilege. The initial concerns of an intersectional lens within the design and participants of this study urged examining systemic racial barriers reinforced by the glaring gaps of language. While participants clearly expressed their experiences involving personal advantages, they were reluctant to place the classification white alongside privilege. Some might attribute this to an unconscious bias, lack of awareness, or white racial silence. Tate and Page (2018) dispute this as a conscious way of excusing and normalizing prejudice and racism. The implication is that individuals are not passive recipients of cumulative educational experiences that create institutionalized racism. Instead, individual failures to discuss racial inequities replicate and maintain white systems of oppression.

**Summary of the Chapter**

In this chapter, each of the participants described similar experiences of high school. There were, however, very different contextual factors that provided a wider lens and range of unique perspectives. The purpose of this study was to explore the narrative experiences of recent transgender high school graduates. These participants contradict the research on trans identity impact and at-risk stereotypes. They also offer insight into the intricate and complex relationships and influence of identity, agency, and school function. Their experiences provided themes related to negotiating heteronormativity, the contexts of language and white racial silence, and the connections that bond the trans high school experience to larger social and political concerns. While contemplating this vision of a better way, I realized that there was something we had all overlooked. In considering the future, we prepared, planned, and became the change we hoped to see.

**Chapter Five: Trans Action and Poetic Justice**
Poetry is embedded in the literature that documents America’s history of oppression and the resulting movements for equity. Gwendolyn Brooks, Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, and Nikki Giovanni are well-known Civil Rights activists who used poetry as protest (Ponton, 2015). Native Americans, suffragettes, and immigrants are also examples of marginalized groups that include poetic voices. Research poetry is considered a creative tool that can help extend participant voices and researcher reflexivity, and it has been used effectively in studies of marginalized populations (Foster, 2012; Oswald A. G., 2019). These associations enriched the use of poetic transcription to guide the analysis and conclusions of this study. Using poetry in research writing challenges traditional research norms, and pairing poems with social justice issues surrounding human rights and equity is a logical union.

Many researchers suggest the construction of poetry to communicate participant experiences in ways that resonate and reflect the nuanced and rich textures of their lives (Furman, 2007; Reilly, 2013). Some question the use of poetic transcription, suggesting that quality research poetry is difficult to define, but can be mitigated by researcher qualifications in the arts and humanities could improve research poetry (Lahman et al., 2019; Lahman et al., 2010; Piirto, 2009). In this study, poetry was used to reduce the distance between participant words and analysis while expanding how representation and meaning are understood. My background as an English teacher helped guide the purposeful and intentional creation of participant poems that center this study. Poems that highlight trans student actions of resistance against institutional forces of oppression. Poems that expose how those systems create normative “truths” and demand justice for trans students.

Review of the Findings
An exploration of retrospective high school experiences and an examination of how trans students cope, make sense of and negotiate school while developing and becoming conscious of their identity were the primary goals of this dissertation. By examining the complex relationships between school function, identity, and agency, the intention was to provide more insight into how educators can affirm and empower trans students. Another essential purpose of this study involved sharing diverse experiences of the largely underrepresented and overly caricatured trans students. It was important to acknowledge their voices as expert advisors in evaluating current high school practices and potential reform areas. Additionally, this study challenges the stigmatizing transgender master narrative that categorizes trans students as at-risk and rarely includes trans voices (Alexander, 2005; Catalpa & McGuire, 2018). This deficit model fosters assumptions that proscribe and fixate on transgender students' assumed traits that make them more likely to struggle in school.

Participants of this study confirm extant research that identifies schools as hostile spaces that fail to provide safe, inclusive, affirming support or empowerment to trans students (Austin, 2016; Budge et al., 2018; Craig et al., 2018; Greytak et al., 2009; Hatchel et al., 2018). The narratives included in this research indicate that high schools are also positioned to suffer the loss of potential contributions by students who see their trans identity as uniquely diverse and situated simultaneously within oppressed and privileged identities. Dismantling the at-risk paradigm involves looking through a lens that explores social support, connections with community, and self-advocacy (Johns et al., 2018; Hackford-Peer, 2010; Singh, 2013; Singh et al., 2014). These trans student experiences and perspectives provide insight into how educators might disrupt damaging discourses that influence curriculum, pedagogy, practices, and policies that create an oppressive environment that silences and erases.
TRANSforming Curriculum: Why do schools silence and erase non-binary identities?

Participants repeatedly articulated frustration with lessons and academic coursework that provide a limiting focus of high school curriculum as preparation for and indicative of college and post high school success. Beyond the typical teenage questioning of whether the periodic table's memorization or the use of the quadratic formula has real-life value, participants expressed a keen awareness of the absence of trans representation within school texts and topics. Grantaire specifically referenced how literature is often a window or mirror, but he added, “they forget to build bridges and find spaces where it’s okay to be both different and the same.” This sentiment was reinforced by Adam, who talked about representation, specifically regarding positive portrayals. Adam remembers vividly watching the movie *Philadelphia* in school, saying, “I mean, like the teacher wasn't like actively homophobic or anything, but she didn't just really talk too much about it, but the main character was a gay man, yeah and he had AIDS, it wasn’t a bad movie, but that was really it.” The significant absence of queer and trans topics created few opportunities for participants to fully self-identify or find self, instead perpetuating feelings of guilt or shame as if trans topics were not appropriate or taboo.

Participants easily remembered missed opportunities where the curriculum could have expanded student conversations and understandings of gender identity and gender roles. Researchers forewarn that when adding texts, selection must include diverse representation to avoid presenting stories that do not portray gender identity as developing, fluid, and multidimensional (Boyd & Bereiter, 2017; Bradford et al., 2019; Ehrensaft et al., 2013). The exclusion of trans specific topics was felt most poignantly in health class during sex education and in biology while learning about genetics. In both cases, gender and sex were primarily related to the heteronormative binary of male and female. Participants recalled rarely learning
LGBT inclusive topics in the classes that they anticipated conversations about gender and identity. Adam initially has a positive memory when he brings up one lesson and then admits, “It wasn’t even the teacher, but someone from Planned Parenthood came in.” Adam and the other participants share similar stories about a single demonstration or lesson on gender and sex in health class over a four-year period. In Biology, Grantaire referenced a lesson on genetic traits, “I mean, we talked about chromosomes kind of, but more as an offshoot of like, Hey, this is how chromosomes are supposed to work, but sometimes they can mess up and do all this other different stuff.” Intersex was never mentioned, and the topic outside of X and Y was a brief addendum; here, once again, a trans student faced an education that not only failed to address gender in a meaningful way but also denied the legitimacy of their identity.

Participants expressed a desire for more than tokenism but wanted, at the very least, representation in areas where it made sense. In English, considering how characters do or do not conform to gender norms and the purposeful inclusion of diverse non-binary gender identities can help create critical and empathetic readers (Schey & Blackburn, 2019). The content of biology class includes chromosomal inheritance and sex-linked traits and an opportunity to grapple with gender complexity (Bazzul & Sykes, 2011; Broadway, 2011; Dzurick, 2018; Fifield & Letts, 2014; Hobbs, 2020). Gender identity discussions extend beyond sex education. In a health class curriculum, these conversations can be incorporated into many other units. Participants brought up what they perceived as obvious connections with lessons on mental health, gender roles, family, etc. Miller (2019) identifies these lapses in comprehensive content and materials that encourage discussions of gender identity as an avoidance to address social issues that might threaten the ultra politically correct classroom. The texts and subjects taught in schools contribute to the reinforcement of binary gender norms and the resulting gender
conditioning that trans students feel to fit into what is represented and reinforced in school curriculum (Boucher, 2011; Keenan, 2017; Smith et al., 2018). Overall, participants reveal curriculum as part of an educational system that pathologizes and denies trans and queer lives.

**TRANSforming Pedagogy: How can teacher and students become social activists?**

Equally as important to content is delivery, and teachers must consider how their pedagogical beliefs and resulting instruction may not only excuse but validate and reinforce trans prejudice and transphobia. Grant and Usnavi both emphasized that a few supportive teachers helped them to feel seen and heard. Other participants felt that teachers might have been experts in their subject area but were clueless about their students’ lives. Cultural competence is often offered to improve awareness of and communication with students across cultures (Villenagas & Lucas, 2002). When approached in a regulatory fashion as training that includes facts on myriad cultures, these competencies instead continue a discourse of difference (Sinclair, 2019).

Ginsberg and Wlodokowski (2019) suggest that a culturally responsive learning environment cannot be culturally neutral and requires a pedagogical alignment that is nuanced and goes beyond inclusion to enhance meaning through discussions that students and teachers perceive as authentic, valuable, and related to the real world. A lack of trans cultural competency has positioned teachers as a significant barrier and complicit in perpetuating discrimination, harassment, and transphobia. Every participant conveyed a curiosity over the degree to which adults in school really knew them, believing that most saw them in binary ways as a good student based on grades or struggling student based on their trans identity, either way missing most of what really mattered.

Participant interviews suggested that change could occur if more teachers were willing to create classrooms centered in a collaboration of teacher and student social (ly) active(ist)
learners. Adam mentioned several high school incidents, where he tried to collaborate with teachers and administrators to create programs that explored identity, privilege, and stereotypes. Each time, he was initially met with interest, and then ultimately, as he termed it, “shot down” because of time constraints or other “more important” priorities. Research suggests that teaching controversial topics leads to critical thinking, greater empathy, and a more humanizing and socially just school climate (Boyd, 2019; Casale et al., 2018; Miller et al., 2018; Shelton, 2019; Singh et al., 2014). Teachers are often hesitant to discuss topics they feel they have not been appropriately trained for since college or topics they fear are too personally charged and outside of their academic specialties. A heuristic and compactivist (compassionate activist) approach provides teachers with the opportunity to include stories and experiences that model and position students as agents of change capable of shifting school culture (Miller S., 2019; Elliott, 2016; Errichiello, 2019; Krywanczyk, 2007). Participants voiced that teachers have the most facetime with students but did not view them as solely responsible for pedagogical choices resulting from the different social and political contexts that inform school policy.

TRANSforming Policy and Practice: Why is there a disconnect?

Unlike other marginalized student populations, such as English-language learners who receive specialized instruction or students living in poverty with lunch assistance programs—however problematic they are, trans students have few formal systems or trans-specific structures. The tendency to generalize school diversity programs as a means of vague trans inclusivity has shifted in part as a result of GLSEN’s call for enumerated school policies that directly address transgender and gender nonconforming youth (Greytak et al., 2009; Greytak et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018). All of the participants in this study were cognizant of Title IX related bathroom federal court cases and New York’s DASA act, an anti-bullying and harassment
policy that specifies sexual orientation, gender, and sex of students as protected categories
(Adams v. School Board of St. Johns County, 2018; Grimm v. Gloucester County School Board, 2019; McNamarah, 2018; The Dignity Act, 2010). Despite schools’ familiarity with trans specific rights, all participants discussed frustrations with the way schools handled bathroom use and preferred name/pronouns.

As discussed in the results section, participants struggled with administrators and staff who were only superficially aware of federal and state guidance regarding trans student rights. Like Grantaire, several participants knew that there was a legal responsibility and even printed out evidence to substantiate requests, but still were subjected to superficial changes or moved to alternate schools. Participant consensus was that the disconnect between policy and school practice was indicative of underlying heteronormative privilege and transphobia that needed to be addressed in conjunction with policy change. Schools resist or ignore opportunities to include trans students in decisions and policies that directly impact their high school experience. Repeatedly Grantaire and Adam attempted to change school bathroom policy and were instead met with half-hearted interest. Even though trans student research consistently reports bullying policies, bathroom use, and gendered pronouns as critical interventions (Hatchel, Valido, De Pedro, Huang, & Espelage, 2018; Merrin et al., 2018; Russell, Pollitt, & Grossman, 2018), schools continue to unsupportive environments that ignore or limit trans inclusive policies and trans student well-being.

TRANSforming Safety: How do schools foster and encourage a sense of safety?

Participants echoed academic studies that extend conceptions of safety to include school climate, but they also criticized traditional conceptions of safe spaces (Kuff et al., 2019; McGuire et al., 2010). Adam pointed out, “There were posters that the GSA had put up, and some
classrooms had the safe space stickers, but the teachers shared classrooms all the time. So, you never really knew whose sticker that was. I don't think, well, it doesn't really have much meaning then.” The absence of clear trans welcoming and affirming teachers or classrooms made it difficult for Adam to discover a sense of belonging. Beyond a physical space, safe spaces are also related to freedom of expression and open discussion. However, teachers struggle with the potential to create an environment that may make students feel uncomfortable or unsafe (Holley & Steiner, 2005). The topic of creating safe spaces as a way of improving social-emotional learning and mental health is debated, and both Grantaire and Usnavi brought this up. Both shared memories of teachers who avoided topics because students might become unruly or uncomfortable and saw this as ineffective teaching that avoids conflict to protect some while ignorant of the impact of silence and its ability to exacerbate others' feelings of rejection.

When formalized safe spaces for open conversation of trans topics like GSA meetings were discussed, participants routinely expressed inconsistent or reluctant participation because of the small number of students involved in the club and because most students were cis-allies and conversations were perceived as ineffectual. Poteat et al. (2017) confirm that when students refrain from participation, they often perceive inadequate guidance of discussion at GSA meetings. Participants also spoke about having a heightened sense of the subtle ways that everyday language is gendered in addition to direct observation of transphobic or prejudiced incidents. Educators are often less likely to intervene in these less conspicuous but equally damaging behaviors. These (Linville, 2017b) microaggressions are partially due to policies that fail to address covert comments rooted in stereotypes, intended as comic relief, or serve to oversexualize.

**Queer Implications for Schools in TRANSition**
The participants of this study expose the many challenges that trans students face. This converges with much of what has been previously reported in research. Some divergences involved moments of self-discovery as participants came to realizations about what those past events meant to them then and now. The nuances of coping strategies and different pathways that participants took to create an affirming support system, formally and informally, differed from resilience studies. Participants did not focus on individual acts of agency but instead expressed their efforts as part of a transition that was initially about protection and inclusion but had the promise of pride, community, and engagement. They were also conscious of and verbalized that it could be different for future students. Many of their more difficult memories were expressed as a series of opportunities where the willingness of adults to challenge the heteronormative would have changed everything about high school.

Queer theory provides a lens and method of disrupting the myth that America’s democratic roots model a pluralistic education system. A belief that schools can balance and validate cultural and ethnic differences while reducing conflict and fostering empathetic learners. While these idealistic values are impressive goals, the reality of the high school experience presented by this study's narratives reveals the oppression, silencing, and erasure of trans identities. Several queer implications focus on how schools can challenge the norms of gender, sexuality, masculinity, and femininity. Some might argue that these suggestions serve as short term band-aids that ignore deeper concerns regarding power dynamics and the roots of language that perpetuates homophobia, transphobia, and oppression. However, both long term and short-term interventions can work simultaneously, and educators need starting points for transforming schools.

Positive Representation
Educators must consider the many opportunities that exist to create positive representations for trans students. Curriculum is one way of including content that addresses gender identity. While the texts used in a course provide a means of expanding gender representation, so does the resulting class discussion. Other means of representation are often ignored, including assignment styles, forms, handouts, resources, and websites. These everyday school practices must be re-imagined in more inclusive and affirming ways outside of the heteronormative gender binary. Trans students who feel comfortable enough to use their chosen name and pronouns in multiple social contexts are reported to have reduced mental health risks (Russell et al., 2018). Educators must consider how representation through pronouns on an e-mail signature or any of the items mentioned earlier might signal affirmation and increase comfort levels.

**Affirming Spaces**

The distinctions between safe spaces and affirming spaces are situated in the stories they tell. Safe spaces are situated in a reactive story that focuses on victimization; an affirming space is proactive and provides feelings of positive acknowledgment (Cavanaugh, 2016). The physical spaces that trans students pass their school days in extends beyond classrooms to lobbies, hallways, offices, cafeterias, gymnasiums, auditoriums, and art studios. These spaces must also be critiqued to gauge levels of welcoming. Schools must consider the images and artwork shared and consider the stories they tell (Greteman A., 2017b; Wolfgang & Rhoades, 2017). Posters that hang on walls, trophies displayed, and signs on doors serve as indicators of school climate, and their intentional and unintentional messaging must be considered. School events are also indicators of disaffirming high school spaces. An absence of school events created to honor queer and trans lives delegitimizes trans students. While the National Day of Silence provides a
moment that acknowledges the silence and erasure of trans and other non-binary gender identities, it is a singular event. Students should not have to search for other trans-affirming and supportive events outside of school.

**Space for Intersectionality and Race**

The conception of a colorblind or neutral education must be acknowledged and actively challenged. The reluctance to engage in meaningful conversations about race is symptomatic of the misguided belief that minimizing differences reduces prejudice and racism (Castagno, 2008). Schools encourage success based on hard work but fail to realize the hollow promise of meritocracy when inequitable distributions of power and oppression impact students. Often, educators' attempts to be “woke” can unintentionally reproduce the systems of oppression they wish to counteract. Hagerman’s (2017) study of white progressive fathers found that the efforts to raise anti-racist children included deracialized language and learning about others' struggles without any discussion of whiteness or privilege. These unintentional mechanisms similarly occur in schools where educators focus on faux inclusion that superficially addresses diversity without facing how power and privilege are reciprocal of white heterosexist norms and ideals. Understanding race and intersectionality is urgently needed to transform schools comprised of students with multiple identities that include race, ethnicity, gender identity, sex, religion, etc. When these intersections become taboo topics, clear messages are transmitted concerning preferred and acceptable identities.

**A Knowledge Base of Continuous Growth**

There is a professional responsibility and obligation when working in schools to be educated in a subject area and educated on issues that are a part of students’ lives. Pre-service requirements and professional development courses must be assessed critically and continuously
to determine whether teachers, administrators, counselors, nurses, aides, substitutes, and staff are provided a knowledge base regarding trans students that is up to date. Changes in preservice and continuing teacher learning can help build gender-expansive and affirming knowledge, but more importantly, examine the ways that heteronormativity shapes behavior (Pennell S. M, 2020; Zacko-Smith & Smith, 2010). Social justice is more than a buzzword and is not a quick fix to placate social controversies (Morris, 2005; Whitlock, 2010). Beyond pronouns and bathrooms, educators are often not taught to examine heteronormative privilege or the complicit practices that maintain the status quo. Educators must be wary of their own heteronormative practices and discourses that marginalize and contribute to trans oppression and fail to provide an equitable education to trans and other non-binary students.

**Community**

Community-based education is often considered an informal, practical, and alternative life education that addresses the failings of formal schooling; however, when schools form partnerships with the community, they can serve each other in complementary ways (Trimble et al., 2012; Nelson et al., 2012). School communities involving multiple stakeholders from within and outside schools can pool ideas and resources to brainstorm how schools can improve existing interventions and develop protective factors to shift reactive practices to trans student empowerment. Actively engaging and creating a school community creates spaces to consider ways to encourage agency, include multiple perspectives, and work towards social justice (Balfanz et al., 2018; Gordon, 2016). Whether it is a mentorship program or a series of guest speakers and student presentations, the work of queering schools is in many ways just as fluid, emergent, and nuanced as the numerous identities that identify as queer. Beyond support and inclusion, queering is meant as a continual critical examination of school policies and practices
to deconstruct homophobia, transphobia, and gender norms and actively pursue individual, school, community, and societal change.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Research informs educational practice and policy. It also provides insight into societal values and concerns. Finally, research has the potential to shape and transform public opinion. Studies involving trans students are slowly becoming more available. Future research must avoid the compartmentalization of trans students within the LGBTQ umbrella and the singular presentation of trans students as an at-risk population suffering from minority stress and victimization. Separating the T and establishing an accurate estimate of trans student populations' size has been complicated by surveys that do not include non-binary gender categories (Dunham & Olson, 2016; Lagos, 2018). Demographic gender categories must be enumerated, or there is the potential to misrepresent trends or patterns.

At the same time, statistical significance and a reliance on numbers has created the bulk of existing trans student research and offers a symptomatic treatment focused on at-risk identifiers that often do not address the underlying causes. A study of trans students of color that explores gender identity alongside white racial silence and socialization may provide additional insight into developing long-term strategies to transform schools. More research that furthers the qualitative goals of highlighting marginalized voices is needed to expand an affirming understanding of trans youth and explore essential distinctions and fluidity within the trans student identity. One way of ensuring authentic representations is to incorporate participant involvement; future research should consider the value of a participatory action approach to involve multiple stakeholders in developing and testing interventions that can promote social change through negotiation, collaboration and ultimately empower trans students (Fish &
Russell, 2018). Schools not only allow but continue to legitimize behavior that oppresses and threatens trans students. Research must continue to encourage educators to consider using their power to set and shape expectations while developing practices and policies to improve the trans high school experience.

**Politics, Protest, Social Justice, and a Poetic Closing**

This dissertation was inspired by and often crossed over into my professional and personal life. Politics surrounded my work, which was proposed and researched during Trump’s presidency. As I finalized the last chapters, there was George Floyd’s death, COVID 19, a tumultuous election, and Joe Biden as President-elect of the United States. For the transgender community, 2020 brought vindication with the Supreme Court backing transgender civil rights and Sarah McBride's election, the first trans state senator. This year, teaching has involved hybrid learning with students split into two cohorts attending school on alternate days. Two keep both cohorts engaged in learning; teachers provide both in-person and live-stream instruction simultaneously. Students and teachers are masked while in school, and classrooms are arranged in rows with desks six feet apart for social distancing. Each day I worry about how my students are managing this new form of school. I hear the grumbling and debates over when all students will be back full time in the background. This discourse is valid, but I do not have time to engage. Instead, I focus on my lessons and how to connect with my students.

For our first unit, re-reading and teaching Martin Luther King Jr. was not a conscious plan, but I could not help noticing the connections between my professional work and doctoral work. This realization encouraged me. When I had my first pop-in observation, the lesson was on the Birmingham Children’s March to introduce King. In a year marked by the tragic death of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter protests, I wondered about allowing the discussion to
become too political. There was an administrator in the room. Maybe I should steer the conversation to *Letter From Birmingham Jail*. Maybe a few years ago, I would have made that shift, but too much has changed. This study has and still is changing me. Instead, the class listened to Malcolm London, a young poet-activist, recite *High School Training Ground*. For forty minutes, I forgot about the observation and leaned into a lesson that gave the class opportunities to use their voice and share their opinions and beliefs about their world and their lives. They had so much to say about the stereotype of an apathetic teenager obsessed with social media. They talked about being too young to vote but still caring. Yet again, the phrasing crossed over into my doctoral work and my section on caring. When the bell rang, my students were slow to leave class and a bit of sadness crept in; we all wanted to keep talking.

Walking out of the building that day, I wondered and hoped that the discussion would continue. My thoughts meandered as I drove home, shifting to chapter five of my dissertation. Earlier in the month, I sent e-mails to all of the participants. It was part of member checking, having them review the poems representing their high school stories. It was not just that, though; I worried about how they were doing. COVID meant a change of format; meetings and socials were held via Zoom. I wasn’t sure the virtual world could be the same safe space for them. That afternoon, I sent a text to the program director and a picture of my title page. We chatted briefly, and I promised to let her know when I finished. I have plans to have a second “dissertation defense” with the group that informed and challenged me. I also wanted to make sure they knew I was not done. That I had not swooped in to study them and then forget. I have kept in touch with Elie as well. We check in now and again via text, and I must confess Elie’s messages have kept me focused. After finishing the first five chapters (minus this closing), I e-mailed them to Elie, who is currently in their second year of college. Waiting for their reaction was one of the
most frightening experiences of my life. It felt like I was naked, bearing my soul, and my fears of authenticity kept me awake at night.

One week later, Elie texted me, asking which email to send their notes to. They advised me to take my time reading, “It’s a little bit of a ramble as I include a mixture of my notes and my own experiences.” Since then, I have re-read their three-page single-spaced response more than a dozen times. I messaged Elie, asking permission to write them a poem. Teachers aren't supposed to have favorites, but Elie is and will always be one of my favorites. My latest message to Elie was, “You are awesome. Even in tenth grade, you were already awesome. I’ll never know what it was like or what it is like. I just know that you are brave and kind. That you stand up for what you believe in. There are a million more things I know. I knew them then too, and I’m sorry that I was so ignorant.” Elie’s poem, a result of poetic transcription, is taken from their response to my dissertation. It felt like poetic justice to have the student who started this journey guide it's [never]ending and a reminder that this dissertation was not about me.

*People like ME*
I remember as a little kid
I wondered if the doctors missed something
I felt so disconnected
I remember starting high school

I joined a couple of clubs
I made new friends
I was, there was -this feeling
I was about to explode
I wanted to run away

With nowhere to turn to
I found the answer
I was trans
MY mom took it well
MY dad had more trouble

THEY both cried MY mom began to educate HERSELF
MY dad tried
I scrapped MY given name and cut
MY hair, I still felt so disconnected

I met MY counselor to make “accommodations”
I had the nurse’s bathroom and
I couldn’t change my name
I felt like an inconvenience
I went to therapy

MY mom helped ME change MY name
MY dad began to refer to ME as HIS “son”
MY English teacher
SHE told ME
SHE was inspired by ME

I remember HER showing ME
HER doctoral proposal
I was taken aback, being vocal about
MY needs was
not particularly extraordinary

I doubted myself
I doubted the kindness of those around me
I felt like THEY would never understand
I didn't have an alternative except to wait
those years of high school felt like an eternity

Realizing YOUR own self-worth takes time
MY choice was advocacy; Not everyone has that
I’m glad YOUR heart was open and
I could play a part in that
There is still so much work to be done

I have learned so much
I have come to the conclusion
as long as there are people like ME
there will be others who care
THEIR encouragement is a crucial part
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**Appendix A: Identity Disclosure Letter**

-------- <xxxxxxl@gmail.com>
Thu 9/8/2016 3:29 PM
To:
Kudla, Mary A <MKudla@XXXXXX>

Hi Mrs. Kudla,

I’m sending this out as an email to all of my teachers this year, to make you aware of some information that is important to my education here at XXXXXX.

I am a transgender person - specifically, I am [nonbinary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nonbinary). Basically, what that means is I’m of a gender that is neither male nor female. Since the way in which people interact with and speak about each other is so dependent on gender, it is usually necessary for me to disclose this information at the beginning of each year, in order to let people know how to refer to me.
My preferred name is xxxxxx, and the pronouns I use are gender-neutral “they/them/their/their/themself.” While using gender-neutral pronouns is my strong preference, I understand that many people who may have never interacted with a nonbinary person before may have difficulty adjusting to using “they” in the singular form - in which, case “XXXXXXX” is preferable to “she.” I also prefer to be referred to using gender-neutral language (“person” instead of “boy or girl,” etc.)

I understand that, since nonbinary people are such a small portion of the population, this might be difficult for some to understand. If you are interested in accessing further resources or learning more about nonbinary and transgender people and accommodating them in the classroom, I have included some links to external resources.

https://apps.carleton.edu/campus/gsc/assets/LTC_Resource_Sheet.pdf

http://www.hrc.org/blog/three-ways-to-respect-non-binary-students-in-the-classroom

I appreciate your anticipated support.

Sincerely,

XXXX
YOU CAN CALL ME JEM
I never actually watched the show
I know SHE had two sides to HER,
but nope wasn’t thinking that

I was thinking gemstones
I think maybe a “J” works better as a name
but, maybe just leave it

I used to play Pokémon
I played the emerald version,
but I think it was the first sign

I liked that choice of being male or female
I wanted to see if there was a difference as a girl,
but I ended up choosing to be a boy

I didn’t want people to make fun
I loved that the girl character’s hair waved when SHE ran,
but instead, I said something about extra frames and the mission

I was very young
I had no clue what it meant,
but I really think it was the first indication I was trans

JEM: PICTURES
I hated seeing these; most are from before
I started figuring out that I was trans
THEY always made ME get that haircut

I look like a typical American boy nerd with glasses
I didn't know I wanted long hair
THEY always made ME get that haircut

I remember once playing at grandma's house,
I played with Legos, and then with dolls
THEY teased, "YOU'RE a girl!"

I held on to that insecurity about being feminine
I mean turns out THEY were right, but that's beside the point
SISTER
We both exist in each other’s worlds

SHE was female HER whole life
SHE has a lifetime of a wardrobe
SHE gets clothes for presents too
SHE is a size small

I couldn't care about clothes
I hated getting dressed up
I didn't realize I just needed different clothes
I can't use MY sister’s clothes

I'm so much bigger than HER
I went through male puberty
I have wide shoulders that make ME a size large
I'm skinny, like what the fuck?

PARENTS
I was not close to either of MY parents
THEY said I was not social enough

THEY said, "HE only cares about video games."
THEY took them away from ME
THEY said, "YOU are only allowed to play for one hour."
THEY did it so much that,
I found workarounds

I went to grandmas, not to see HER,
I just want to go to the basement to play video games all day
I went to other kid’s houses,
I played video games there too
THEY didn't realize

THEY asked, “How was school today?”
THEY don’t really care
THEY don’t want to know YOUR opinion of things
THEY don’t actually care
I learned to say what THEY wanted ME to say

I became even more socially inept
I became even more shy
I became even more obsessed
I kept chasing after this one thing, because
THEY kept ME from exploring freely
MOM
I try to ask HER about makeup
SHE's always like, "Put this on light and don't go crazy with any of this."
SHE is very opinionated and not just about makeup
SHE is very much against ME exploring at all

SHE took ME to the mall
I needed a whole new wardrobe
I was told just a t-shirt and some jeans
I got a sweater thing too, to cover up

I started growing breasts but didn’t know anything about bras
SHE was like, "Oh my God, wire is like the worst."
I learned about colors and wire in the store, but
I wasn’t allowed to buy anything, but plain cotton

I wanted to try on a skirt
I wanted to see what it's like
SHE’S like, "That's a waste of time.”
I still have never tried on a skirt,

I might outgrow stuff
I guess MY body is going to change more
I understand not wanting to go overboard with fancy clothes
SHE makes it about money, how much things cost, and waste

SHE doesn’t get there’s a degree of like
I want to at least like try things on
I want to have maybe MY one or two fancy things that look good
I just want an opportunity to find out what I like
JEM: GIRLFRIEND
I had one friend, a girl
SHE lived very close to MY house
SHE was MY friend for a long time, even before pre-K

I noticed the girls more in elementary school too
TEACHERS made lines separating boys and girls
I wanted to be part of the girls more than the boys

Boys made fun of ME and some
Girls did too
THEY called HER MY girlfriend

I told HER I can't be around YOU
I told HER I hated HER
THEY still made fun of US

I finally, in high school, just gave in
I told HER I don't love YOU, but let's date
THEY think we are together anyway

I took HER into the basement
I played video games
SHE was MY GIRLFRIEND

I would walk HER home from the bus
I told HER to give ME a hug and a kiss
SHE said on the cheek

I pressured HER into kissing ME on the lips
I was a horny teenager
I was the typical guy who pushes for more

I tried to shove MY tongue in HER mouth
I actually scared HER a little
THEY weren’t even there to watch

I treated HER like shit and broke up with HER
I became the asshole
THEY treated ME like garbage

I can be the asshole too
I really regret it now
She still hates ME even after all these years
JEM: SCHOOL
I was a robot, no emotion
I put happiness on lockdown,
I was "too sensitive," and THEY made fun of ME

I'd get angry and yell
Teachers said I was “becoming a problem.”
I needed attention

I bit MY arm, blamed someone else, and cried
The teacher said, "YOU get up now."
The principal said, “YOU’re OK.”

I was wasn't OK, but no one really cared
The teachers just didn’t want to deal with it
The principal just wanted to walk around the hall and say hi

I was bullied a lot
I wanted teachers to notice, but not the spotlight
THEY would have just had a bigger target to bully ME

I tried to be an extrovert in ninth grade
I was loud and very high energy
THEY just found ME more annoying

I joined Mathletes and Future Business Leaders of America
I didn’t really do anything
THEY had some fundraisers; that’s about it

I learned that I was better off being an introvert
I heard guidance counselors say do good in school, go to college, and have a future
Adults stopped If I was quiet, and MY grades never dropped

I made a few friends,
I tried with MY tiny friend group a different name
THEY were cis, some of THEM were exploring sexuality

I started to explore at home by MYself
I tried lipstick and a ponytail, on the computer
I learned trans stuff and did research

I didn’t go to prom, none of MY friends were going
I would’ve ended up standing around doing nothing
THEY didn’t really care

I started exploring a little bit more at the end of high school
I decided after graduation,
MY fresh start would be college

FRIENDS
I have MY first friend group here
I don't think HE hated ME
I think HE kind of didn't like ME too much
I remember HE wasn't totally against ME but by high school,
THEY were all gone

I made a few more FRIENDS, but
THEY were the wrong kind
THEY weren't into drugs or anything (some of THEM probably were)
THEY would constantly insult themselves, insult each other
THEY thought making fun of each other meant we were best buds

I made fun of one friend that liked My Little Ponies
I told him HE was gay
I was surprised by how unfazed HE was and
I started laughing awkwardly
HE was a friend for a while

I CAME OUT AS TRANS
I came home from college
I was still new
I threw bright red lipstick on, really garish makeup

THEY probably saw ME as kind of crazy, but
THEY always had more conservative political views about things, so even if
I actually looked good
THEY probably still would've reacted the same way

THEY were over it, hanging out
THEY text ME
I thought everything was fine, and then after
THEY'RE like, "Hey, YOU shouldn't do that YOU’RE going to regret it."

I threw makeup on; maybe it didn't look good, but like
I just kind of want YOU to maybe call ME a different name
THEY'RE just like, "Can't do that."
I am still the same person

THEY broke ME a just a little bit
THEY would do that,
THEY made a point of saying, look in a mirror and see how terrible this is

MOM and DAD
THEY were real assholes half the time,
THEY don't even realize or
THEY say,  
"WE weren't bad back then YOU were just weird."

I wasn't weird  
I was suicidal  
I thought MY life was worthless  
THEY just want to get away from the situation

I told this one friend  
I should go through with it  
I thought THEY might deny it  
THEY were like, "I'm calling YOUR parents."

I was like, “Please don't call MY parents.”  
I really thought  
I would be grounded for being suicidal  
THEY didn't do that

I started counseling to find self-worth  
I'm closer to MY parents now  
I just don't always see eye to eye  
THEY aren't so wide open, but  
I am now
**PEOPLE**
I thought people saw ME a certain way
I thought everyone was against ME
I felt it

People thought weird
People thought annoying
People made fun of ME

I know in THEIR mind THEY still think of ME as a guy
I think it’s MY voice that gives ME away
I want to pass

People only look at ME as a transgender person
People make mistakes with MY pronouns
People make mistakes with MY name

I realize maybe everybody wasn't looking at ME a certain way
I look back on it and,
I wish that people could know and then still think of ME as a woman

Dear God, what the fuck is wrong with YOU people?

**JEM: DEFINING TRANS**
I’m trans
it’s an umbrella term
It encapsulates anyone that feels that

THEY don’t match
THEIR assigned birth gender

some people experience dysphoria,
I do in MY case

some are binary,
some are non-binary

Sexuality is different, but
THEY think of genitalia and
THEY are linked, but it’s separate
ADAM: COMING OUT I
I started off high school looking pretty feminine
I slowly incorporated more masculine clothing and hairstyles
I just kind of cut MY hair short
I was 14 going on 15

I was a little nervous to do everything all at once
I just kind of like did it gradually if that makes sense, for
MY own comfort level and so
MY parents wouldn't freak out too much

I told MY mom, and then
MY mom told
MY dad after HE got home from work

I was in an argument with MY mom
I didn't want to wear makeup, and
I just got into explaining why and then
SHE was just like, no, YOU'RE not, YOU'RE a girl, YOU were born this way

I got the whole; it's a phase thing several times
THEY were just like, don't tell anyone at school

I remember more of the negative things
THEY said, "You're not going to be like Chaz Bono, or are you?"
THEY said things like, “I might as well drive my car into the ocean.”
THEY said things like, “I knew a masculine lesbian, now she has a husband and kids.”
THEY didn't remember that
THEY denied saying all of those things
THEY were like, "We never said that."

I found a lot of resources online
I was like, "Hey, here's a video. Do YOU want to watch it?"
I was like, "Hey, do YOU want to come with ME and do MY therapy session?"
I'm just like, “Well, here's an educational resource, and here's some more.”
I'll just bombard YOU with them until YOU pay attention

I waited about two years before
THEY started calling ME by
MY name, the timeline's a little fuzzy there
MY therapist knew a lot about the community
HE wasn't trans himself, but
HE helped educate THEM

MY mom helped with
MY name paperwork and filling it out
THEY have been helpful like financially with
THEIR insurance so
I can stay on it and then
I could get hormones.

**ADAM: COMING OUT 2**
I would have liked to have been out earlier
I could have done without double puberty

I started off high school looking like pretty feminine
I slowly incorporated more masculine clothing and hairstyles
I just kind of cut MY hair short
I casually phased out the more feminine clothing and phased in masculine

I was a little nervous to do everything all at once
I just kind of did it gradually if that makes sense, for
MY own comfort level and so
MY parents wouldn't freak out too much

My extended family was different
I was here and
THEY were filming a NICK tv news special
THEY were taping for National Coming out Day
I was interviewed for it
THEY didn’t air it until over a year later

I was just like, Hey, YOU should watch this
I'm going to be in it
I came out on like a national level basically
HAIR
I had a Facebook profile when I was--., but
I deleted it
I made a new one after
I cut my hair

I borrowed someone's hat once to cover my hair
I was trying to look masculine
I liked to play with my gender expression
I didn't have much autonomy back then

My hair was very blonde, that was
My mom's doing; SHE’s a hairdresser
I like showing off a haircut now
I still think I deserved "best hair" for a guy
YOU CAN CALL ME ADAM
MY first name was pretty gender neutral
I chose MY name when
I wasn't sure what
I identified as fully
I changed it to a shorthand version, but it was too short,

I cycled through middle names, like people cycle through underwear
I got it legally changed and had to decide
I picked a name that gave ME the same initials
I was given at birth
MY parents appreciated that

I had an idea about what YOU could call me
I considered it as a middle name
I was like really into a show called Degrassi High
I like that Adam, one of the characters, was
MY first representation of a trans man
ADAM: NAME 2
I started the name change process, then
I started telling people
MY name and pronouns in twelfth grade
I could be MY authentic self

I went to see MY guidance counselor
HE said HIS wife’s school also wouldn't change names
HE said THEY get the first initial on the student ID cards instead of the full name
I told him that’s great for some of THEIR names, but what if
THEY didn't keep the same initials

I told teachers I'm here, but call ME a different name
I assumed the pronouns would follow and it would be implied, but no
THEY might have been focused on other things or
THEY didn't particularly care

THEY refused to change it and
MY birth name was put on MY diploma for "legal" reasons
THEY said school records and government records must be aligned
THEY compromised after I kept asking, so
MY chosen name was used in the yearbook and at graduation.
ADAM: THE BATHROOM INCIDENT 1
I was probably like the first one of the trans category
I tried to ask to use the men's bathroom
I remember talking to the dean about using the bathrooms
I was told to change for gym and go to the bathroom in the nurse's office

HE mentioned a staff bathroom but
HE never told ME where the staff bathroom was
HE made small talk, mentioning a student who was a drag queen
HE didn’t know that was different

I explained that some might do drag and identify as trans
I said that’s gender expression, expression versus identity

ADAM: THE BATHROOM INCIDENT 2
I went to prom,
I didn’t go with MY girlfriend
SHE had already established a stag friend date, so
SHE went with a group of friends
I brought a friend from outside of school
I mostly hung out with MY girlfriend
I hung out with MY date obviously, too

I had fun, well parts of it.
I don't remember what it was called it, but
THEY had an after-prom at Dave and Buster
THEY figured It was an incentive to not go out and get drunk
I didn't want to be wearing a suit all night, so
I went to go change in the bathroom and put my pajamas on
I was told I couldn't go into the men's bathroom by this one teacher.

I had seen him in school, whenever
I had to be in the computer lab for a class
HE was like walking out
HE said, "YOU can't come in here."
I said, "Where else am I supposed to go?
I'm in a suit.
I identify as male."

I guess I didn't pass well enough.
I ended up changing in the janitor's closet cause because
I didn't want to go into the women's restroom
I never brought it up at school; it was the day before graduation.
I didn't really say anything
I was just like, why bother with taking action
I'm going to be out of here tomorrow
YOU CAN CALL ME GRANT
I picked a name for you; it was
MY first name choice
I didn't pick Grant because of the military
I did have that consideration
MY Grant is actually one of
MY favorite superheroes

I didn't keep it, because when
MY mom came out to
MY dad for ME, SHE said
HE was asking about YOU, and
HE wanted to know what's the deal with
MY birth name now

I just decided to go find a name
MY favorite tv show character, HIS name is Grant
MY mom wasn't a huge fan of it
SHE said SHE's tired of "G" names in my family
SHE helped ME pick out a different name, and that's how
I chose MY actual name
I was called a loser and a tomboy as a child
I was continuously told; it was just a phase, something that
I'd grow out of it
I would listen to this, and MY head wanted not to agree
I went to sleep,
I prayed to God
I said, "Please God, I don't ask for much, but can
I, please wake up to be a boy?"

I woke up, nothing changed, and MY heart would break
I was ashamed of MY feelings
I never voiced THEM out loud
I became more guarded, more depressed, and more isolated
I didn't even understand why
I was thinking about these things
I never even heard of anyone feeling like ME
I never heard of the term transgender

I thought
I must be crazy, and if
I told anyone
I'd be labeled a freak and thrown out
I know now that
I'm not the only person in the world that felt this way
I take comfort in that, but back then
I was alone and afraid
MARCHING BAND AND THE MILITARY
I joined the marching band in high school
I would say band gave ME confidence
I found a family and friends
MY yearbook is filled with signatures, almost all of
them from band

I was even put in a captain position
I had marching band four years, every single day
I think high school was one of
MY better times because of band

I know that excelling in band was my ticket in
I was good at it; it had that element of being militaristic
I liked that everyone wore the same uniform and it wasn’t figure hugging
MY band director, HE made me feel included

I was raised in a very, very American family
MY GRANDFATHER was in the Navy, and
HE was my idol growing up
He always said to me, “------s are never drafted
THEY are always enlisted.”

I wanted to be in the military
I was a military person through and through
I said to MYSELF,
I am going to be the absolute American
I am going to West Point and this book,

I read it backward and forwards
MY bible in high school, learning to be the best cadet, but
I didn't have the amount of physicality or grades
I think band prepared me though
I think it led me to choose Army ROTC in college
PROM
I was being watched and judged for how
I acted, so towards the end of high school,
I tried to push myself as far away from acting masculine as
I could, wore a dress to prom, putting on makeup or
MY hair down and carefully styled
I was pretending a lot
I hated that day
I hated my hair down
I always wanted it short
MY Parents said not till YOU’re 18
I tried so hard to be what everyone wanted ME to be
I hurt MYself, the humiliation
I felt humiliation looking in the mirror, yet
I couldn't say anything
My parents were so happy, and
I couldn't take that away from them

GRANT: COMING OUT 1
I first came out to MY mother
MY freshman year of college
I video called HER, wouldn’t suggest it
I think it’s better to do in person
I said,
“I don’t identify as a woman
I identify as a man.”
I had been looking it up all night,
I read everything and
I finally had a term for how
I feel
I know SHE had a lot of trouble at first, but
MY mom didn't have the resources people have now
I think SHE has a lot of guilt about that, but
I know SHE would kill anyone that tried to say anything to hurt ME
I think it was another form of conformity, the uniform again
I think it also was another closet, but
I was safe; Obama said that transgender people can serve
I needed to come out

I started working that summer with
MY father in the city, and on the phone,
I saw Trump said transgender people weren’t allowed to serve
I just remember thinking, “What am I going to do?”
I had been in the closet MY entire life, now another three years?

I knew who I was finally and
I can’t lie, even a lie of omission
I went back to college and over to my cadre and
I told them about being transgender
I did want to continue and didn’t want it to be awkward, but after that

I was told I could stay in civilian classes, but no more of
MY physical training or lab exercises
I wasn’t going to get any contracts or scholarships
I walked out of the armory, thinking,
I don’t have a purpose anymore

I felt like I didn’t have a future
I sank into a depression
I stopped going to classes
I started lying to my parents, but
I just couldn’t figure out what I was supposed to say

I was very suicidal
MY mom was on the phone asking if
I was okay and
I remember saying,
“I’m not okay.”

I know SHE was angry,
I wasn’t telling the truth
I should be paying attention in class
I heard HER say
I was being pulled out of school
COMING HOME AND COMING OUT AGAIN
I came home with my tail between my legs
I was so worn down and then
I was hospitalized, an unknown viral infection
I was surrounded by four or five doctors

My face is swollen and throat almost closed
MY mortality shifted
MY perspective in the ICU, with an IV in
MY arm and the tracheotomy kit next to the bed

I've never felt so impermanent, once
I was let out of the hospital
I thought about life and what
I really wanted

MY thoughts led to a public post
MY hidden thoughts and feelings, no more of
MY self-denials
MY truth on Facebook

I wrote in all caps, “PLEASE READ,
I do not identify as a woman
I am a transgender man.”
I think like everyone saw it

MY dreams of the army crushed, because
MY body does not correspond, but somehow
MY heart somehow finding another way to be of service and be
MYSELF
Usnavi’s Poems

YOU CAN CALL ME USNAVI DE LA VEGA
I got the name from MY favorite musical
HE’s like a dorky Hispanic bodega dude
HE sings this opening song, “In the Heights,” and shows how
HE struggles with embracing
HIS American and Latino sides
HIS neighborhood is Washington Heights in New York City and
HE wonders about the cost of the American dream
HE yearns for the Dominican Republic and home, but when
HE goes back he finds out that
HIS home is really in New York City
I just think like that’s the sweetest little story

USNAVI: PICTURES
I used to have hair all the way down to MY butt
I refused to cut MY hair
I only didn’t ever want to, because everyone would tell ME
I should cut it

I didn’t even like long hair
I thought it was too feminine, so
I wore it in a braid and then,
I could always split the end in half to look like a mustache

I think the hair was maybe something to hide behind
I know some people will look back at their old self and think, oh, that’s gross
I don’t want to think about old ME, but then
I look back at MY old self and realize

I wasn’t that bad, not a super girly girl or super tomboyish
I was always somewhere in between
I was androgynous, like in the middle, except for one picture
I was wearing a blue dress

I don’t like to see myself in dresses, but other times,
I went from having super long hair to a ponytail to short
I like seeing those changes
I don’t think the pictures are like negative, nor fully positive

I don’t know the word to describe it
I guess just like cathartic
I think it felt like remembering a bad memory, but something that
I’ve gotten over
USNAVI: COMING OUT
I came out in tenth grade; it was a big year,
I told my mom about everything
I told her I was bi, depressed, and trans,
I needed help and
I needed to get therapy

SHE wasn’t really accepting at first, but eventually
SHE actually took care of all the legal stuff and
SHE handled the name change, but when
SHE tries to explain it,
SHE tends to word it as a “different lifestyle.”
SHE’s not wrong, it is different, but it's just ME

HE’s a little worse, My dad
HE never says anything about it that’s rude
HE usually just tries to avoid talking about it
HE started crying when he found out, because
HE just kind of felt like
HE was losing HIS daughter

I’m not an only child
I have an older brother
I never really felt close to HIM
I never even had a big talk with him about it
I came out in the middle of HIS senior year
I don’t think he really had to deal with it much

They’re all supportive in MY family but,
They don't really understand it as well as
They should
USNAVI: HIGH SCHOOL
MY high school was actually a split experience
I told you that I came out in tenth grade and
I was mostly alone; it was a bad time.
MY main high school was only part of my school day

I went to vocational school in eleventh and twelfth grade
MY escape, that’s what it was and
MY classes were about computer animation
I know it was a better experience

MY honors classes and music weren’t enough
I was kind of hurt by people in regular high school
I came out as trans and felt
MYself being ignored or called weird

I never really used the bathrooms in school.
MY fear was the judgment of others
MY preference was to wait till I got home
I was stuck, just like the locker room

My teachers also told ME that
I couldn’t change MY birth name
I knew that wasn’t true
MY parents didn’t need to give permission

I left campus for six periods of the day to go to
MY other school, where I used
MY preferred name and pronouns
I noticed that no one seemed to care much about it
USNAVI: HIGH SCHOOL 2
I was a bit of a pain when it came to MY schedule
I saw MY guidance counselor a lot.
I knew that kids in honors classes would have more understanding
I was on the principal’s honor roll and really good at the cello too
I felt they helped me prove
I was a good child, but in class

I knew more than MY teachers knew.
I said, “It’s not a choice” in MY psychology class
I remember talking about some LGBTQ topics
I think it was in AP government and Supreme Court cases and
I know we glossed over it in health
I even argued with an English teacher about using THEY

I guess school over emphasized bullying or drugs, not MY real life
I started seeing the social worker, but
I never felt I could really go to HER for much
I felt SHE was very on the surface, nice
I could tell SHE was just being nice; it was HER job
I knew SHE never genuinely cared

I wonder how SHE became the GSA advisor
I could see like, SHE knew some stuff, but not enough
I joined for a little bit, but
I didn’t feel like WE ever even talked about anything LGBTQ
I sort of gave up, not bothering to fight over bathrooms
I had it better than a lot of MY friends

I know that it could have been much worse
I had to deal with bullying and passive-aggressive comments
I wasn’t literally being beaten up
I’m not sure if degrees of damage matter
I just know that I was suicidal and

I think it could have been better
I want to say different isn't inherently bad
I know how some things present as an inconvenience
I need THEM to realize it might mean the whole world to someone else
I know that THEY have the power to change lives
I wish more had been done for ME
YOU CAN CALL ME GRANTAIRE
I was thinking of Hugo cause, Victor Hugo,
HE's like MY favorite author. Then,
I was thinking of almost every character
but probably Grantaire

HE's a very minor character in a group of student revolutionaries
HE's the one that says, “I don't believe in your revolution.”
HE and HIS foil are written in a very homoerotic way; it's
MY favorite book

I love everything about HIM
HE has HIS flaws, but I've always kind of connected with
HIM and thought, “Oh,
HE's just like ME,”

YOU don't believe in something, but
YOU still have like so much love and compassion for
YOUR friends that do, even if YOU share different beliefs
HE has so much admiration for HIS friends

That’s something I aspire to be

GRANTAIRE: THE GREY AREA
I was a very feminine girl
I presented that way for a long time
I think until the tail end of puberty

I was very proud of MY body
I never had great self-confidence, but
I was confident enough to go damn,
I have curves

I started exploring with gender and then coming out,
I went right into the super, super masculine camp
I think a lot of people do, to avoid a gray area
I don't want to be this, so instead, be the exact opposite

I know that it did take a while to realize
I don't have to do that because
I’m not super happy, trying to conform to that stereotype
I don’t need to be more outwardly validated
GRANTAIRES: THE UMBRELLA
Nobody’s high school experience is attached to one part of
THEIR identity, so even though there is a core set of experiences,
like dysphoria, name and pronoun, and revolving gender expression
MY identity is still made up of many parts
MY high school experience being trans, it's very much intertwined with
MY personality and also
MY mental health struggles

I came out as a trans man to ease people in, then
I was like no, so
I'm doing this to make other people happy
I'm gonna choose a different name for
MYself because that's what it should be
I had to kind of ease back into the non-binary label
I guess trans is right, technically

I mean, nonbinary is an umbrella term as well.
I identify as nonbinary and also trans
I do, some don't
MY opinion is pretty much that trans is just an umbrella term for
anybody who's not cisgender, for
anybody who's not comfortable with what
THEY were labeled at birth

I think there is a distinction between transgender and trans, when
YOU say trans,
YOU're not necessarily transgender.
I've seen transgender usually denoting either
somebody who was assigned male at birth or
somebody was assigned female at birth, and switching over
I think it is very complicated, the term transgender in the trans community

I know that it is used as a medical term
My medical records say transgender man
My doctors know that's not
MY identity, but for legal purposes, that's what it has to say
I know it's not necessarily just those two like the male-female categories
MY birth certificate has an X because
I'm lucky to be born just over the county line
GRANTAIRE: COMING OUT
I didn't formally come out; there was no one moment
I remember my dad helped ME tie MY tie
I felt a little weird, but
I kinda just brushed it off
I felt like it kind of came in little bits, that
YOU start with one thing and then
YOU might move to another thing
YOU know, over the years like little lights that went off
I came out as bisexual in eighth grade to friends
I have a vivid memory of Roosevelt Field Mall
I was sitting on the second floor of Macy's rug section
I remember specifically how
I had built it up irrationally
MY hands shaking and sweating
My lips mumbling something about liking girls
MY friends curious, who do YOU like, the person, not the gender
I came out to MY mom next; it sounds cliché but
SHE is MY best friend
SHE was an integral part of ME coming out as trans
SHE noticed something was wrong
My uncle is gay, and MY mom was a little oblivious
SHE likes to tell the story of when HER brother came out, that
SHE had a crush on HIS best friend, and asked does YOUR best friend know?
SHE didn’t realize THEY were dating, so it was funny
I came out to MY dad too, and then retracted it,
I said trans man and then non-binary
I know it was hard for HIM to wrap HIS head around
MY family just is never going to click in the same way MY mom does
GRANTAIRE: DEAD NAME
I think SHE was like a social worker,
SHE was like finishing HER master's or something.
I talked to HER about coming out and being trans
SHE noticed in the office a board with birthdays on it
I knew it still had MY dead name on it, and
SHE's like, do YOU want to go upstairs and change it?
I didn't feel like I needed to be official about it and
SHE's like, come on, let's write it and erased the dead name
I didn't want to get in trouble for it
SHE ended up leaving the school, but wow
I knew it meant a lot

I was able to write down MY name in MY own hand,
I don't really like the name deadname, but
I also don't like the name birth name
I like given name; MY parents gave ME that name
I think of this phrase deadname like,
YOU can't keep any of who YOU were or
YOU have to let that person die to become who
YOU are, which is so sad
YOU can still carry both
It always surprises me hearing, MY own voice
I think a lot of students feel like
THEY won't be heard or that
THEY, the teacher, won't care

I know what that feels like, so
I'm more willing to, to listen to what
THEY have to say, but
THEY use scare tactics, “This is what happens if YOU do not listen.”

I heard the assistant principal say
I couldn’t use the boy’s bathroom or change MY name
THEY tried to say it wasn't feasible like logistically
THEY said the school board would have to address it

I would want to go to the bathroom, but the only one available to ME, quote-unquote safely, was the girl's room.
I didn't feel comfortable there.
I felt like somebody would call ME and go, “Why are YOU here?

I have such a visceral memory of whipping the paper out saying,
“I can, actually.”
“I’m legally allowed to use the bathroom and name I want.”
“I don’t want to get lawyers involved.”

I couldn’t afford it, but THEY didn’t know that
I had a problem that THEY didn't want to deal with
THEY should have had the ability to deal with that
THEY were going to have to figure it out

I know that I would have pushed even further
MY "emotional troubles,"; that was the wording THEY used
I came out trans, and then it was YOU’re just acting out
I mean, really slapping on a label and a different school

I was only in high school for a couple of periods a day after that
I definitely felt some loss, but it was easier to let it go
I mean, it was only across the street, but it was still a significant otherness
YOU didn’t belong, not only ME but for anybody who was in the program
GRANTAIRE: A PROPER EDUCATION
I remember knowing from ninth or tenth grade on,
I knew for a fact that Shakespeare had a history of being bisexual
YOU know,
WE could have really talked about that in Intro to Shakespeare or English

I remember in biology
WE vaguely studied physical sexuality
YOU know, there's a difference between sexes
I remember labeling the physical character characteristics

I recall talking about chromosomes, but
I just think it was kind of brushed over
I mean, of course, like most people MY age,
I learned a lot of stuff on the internet

I never assumed that it was something that could be talked
I always assumed that it was, that was a topic for a health class
I remember sex education was a small part of
MY half-year health course in tenth grade

like everything was assumed to be heteronormative and cis
like, occasionally, they mentioned specifically just gay people, just one type of sex.
I had health twice
I took the other half senior year

We didn’t talk about sex at all instead,
We focused on nutrition, substance abuse, and drinking
I think the teacher thought WE would misbehave, so
HE tried to stay away from the topic

I think it makes the topic more taboo
WE were forced to find alternative sources
I think if a school doesn’t provide a proper education
YOU’re going to turn to sources that may not be the most reliable
JOINING OUR VOICES AND DEMANDING CHANGE
I know what it’s like to be disenfranchised
I didn’t really have anyone to talk about it to
I’m a kid trying to figure this out myself
I tried to advocate for myself more
THEY were just like, never mind, no need to change

YOU know not having someone to turn to, to help navigate
MY trauma and pain, that's what drove
ME to try to help somebody else
I do like advocating for MYSELF and others
I mean, if an opportunity arises to educate

YOU never know like who's going to be in the room
YOU never know who is trans or knows someone who is trans
I think being visible is the most important way to help on
MY own terms on
MY own time and publicly in order to help others

I am trans; it’s not the only aspect of who I am; if
YOU are only dealing with that
YOU are anticipating that one factor is causing these issues
YOU need to pay attention to individual students
YOU need to realize that there are mental health issues at play

I think that's the big picture, working with and reading
YOUR students and going, “What do THEY need?”
YOUR students, “Do THEY know who to go to or have a safe space?
YOU know, what kind of space should the classroom or school be?
YOU should look at the building, the offices, the classrooms

MY school’s guidance office was just college banners
YOU should think about what that says
I think I remember a few posters that the GSA put up (once)
YOU should think about how that feels
I mean, how about school events

YOU know, how is one bullying presentation going to work
WE did the Day of Silence in MY school
WE had a GSA bake sale fundraiser, all in June
YOU should think about what it says if the few events
YOUR school holds are sequestered to the shortest and last month

THEY function within individual politics, personal morals, or public image
THEY need educating, start at the college level, teaching teachers
THEY could pair an organization, like what is done here, with schools
THEY need to give the teachers who are already teaching a knowledge base
THEY need to give the students and parents the terminology too

YOU know too many times the voice is an adult voice
YOU know, maybe the voice needs to be an adult voice partnered with
YOU know, someone who's dealt with it and goes through the same situations
YOU know someone who has thought about how lessons can embrace US

I wish there had been a judgment-free zone that included US
I wish that THEY had those things, so
I could have transitioned earlier and
I would have been proud to use MY name
I wouldn’t have been so scared

YOU KNOW, I think that would have changed everything