

PARENTS' EXPERIENCES AS THEY INTERACT WITH THEIR  
TRANSGENDER CHILDREN'S SCHOOLS

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**Title**

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The Supervisory Committee certifies that this *disquisition* complies with North Dakota State University's regulations and meets the accepted standards for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of parents and caregivers in a parenting role of a transgender child as they interacted with their children's schools. For this study, 22 interviews with parents and caregivers were analyzed. Utilizing a queer feminist framework, analysis revealed that parents' experiences with schools depended largely upon the school's degree of inclusiveness regarding gender, gender identity, and gender expression. Results, educational and clinical implications, and limitations, as well as suggestions for future research are discussed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## **DEDICATION**

To all of the affirming parents and caregivers of transgender and gender expansive children:  
Your continuous encouragement and support help pave the way toward a more inclusive future.

Thank you for everything you do to make our world a better place.

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## CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

The core responsibility for providing a safe environment in which children are able to pursue their education lies with school systems (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Jacob, 2013; Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Sausa, 2005). However, for students who do not conform to traditional gender roles or social expectations of gender expression, school can quickly become an unsafe and even dangerous place (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Jacob, 2013; Zammitt, Pepperell, & Coe, 2015). Developmentally, gender identity, or children's internal understandings of themselves as girls or boys, is evident by approximately age two (Boskey, 2014; Brill & Pepper, 2008; Burgess, 2000; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; Ryan, 2009); therefore, attention must be paid to the role schools and their policies play in children's abilities to express their gender freely.

Individuals who identify as cisgender experience their gender identity, expression, and presentation as congruent to the gender associated with their assigned birth sex (Boskey, 2014; Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2013). Alternatively, individuals who identify as transgender affirm that their experience of gender is inconsistent with that typically associated with the biological sex to which they were assigned at birth (Ehrensaft, 2012; HRC, 2013). Comparably, individuals who identify as gender creative or gender expansive typically feel as though their gender identity and/or expression should not be limited to the gender associated with their assigned birth sex (HRC, 2013; Riley, Sitharthan, Clemson, & Diamond, 2011).

Parents of children who identify as transgender, gender creative, and/or gender expansive may seek to allow their children to socially transition in schools (Luecke, 2011; Menvielle, 2012). A social transition offers children a chance to alter their gender expression from one that is guided by social norms to one that best fits their internal feelings of gender or their gender

identity (Luecke, 2011; Malpas, 2011; Menvielle, 2012). Social transitions also offer children a chance to further embrace their expansive gender identities and reject gender-biased social expectations by requesting the use of preferred names and gender affirming pronouns (HRC, 2013; Luecke, 2011). Additionally, children may request the use of preferred gender restrooms and locker rooms, as well as adopt a gender expression that aligns more accurately with their gender identity (HRC, 2013; Luecke, 2011). For the purposes of this study, the term transgender will be used to refer to children who identify as transgender, gender creative, and/or gender expansive, as well as those who do not identify in these ways, but indicate that they do not feel they conform to gender-biased social expectations.

According to a 2007-2008 report from the U.S Department of Education, children in the U.S. spend an average of 6.64 hours at school per day for an average of 180 days per year. Next to families, school environment plays a vital role in the safety and overall well-being of children; particularly those who do not adhere to strict gender expectations (Jacob, 2013; Luecke, 2011; Minter, 2012; Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2012; Slesaransky-Poe & García, 2009). Transgender children, in particular, report higher incidents of harassment at school (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Grant, et al., 2011; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012; Sausa, 2005). Examples of harassment in schools include instances of bullying from peers, as well as teachers and staff (Grant, et al., 2011; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; McGuire, et al., 2010; Toomey, et al., 2012; Sausa, 2005). Transgender children are also more often denied access to school resources and after school activities, as well as restrooms and locker rooms that align with their gender identity (Grant, et al., 2011; McGuire, et al., 2010; Sausa, 2005). Some parents of transgender children find the hurdles their children face within schools to be so overwhelming that they transfer their



child to a different school altogether (Johnson, Sikorski, Savage, & Woitaszewski, 2014; Kuvalanka, Weiner, & Mahan, 2014). In more severe cases, parents have made the decision to uproot their families and move somewhere their child can enroll in a more accepting and supportive school (Grant, et al., 2011; McGuire, et al., 2010; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). Though children are unique, and their experiences and stories vary greatly, more scholarly research is needed to better understand not only the significance of an inclusive and supportive school environment (Luecke, 2011), but also the role parents play in helping the schools become more inclusive and supportive (Minter, 2012).

When schools are lacking in their ability to provide children with a safe learning environment, parents often feel compelled to step in (Minter, 2012). According to Minter (2012), in the past decade, new legal protections and awareness for the vulnerabilities of transgender youth in the U.S. have increased. Additionally, the number of states offering non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies protecting transgender youth against discrimination and bullying has increased (Minter, 2012). However, the existing policies do not necessarily address the issues transgender children often face in schools. For many parents, continued discrimination and harassment of their children forces them to take legal action, which allows them to fight for the rights of their transgender children (Minter, 2012).

Lawsuits also serve to compel the schools to provide transgender students access to the same opportunities and resources as their cisgender peers (Minter, 2012). For example, in June 2013, a legal case was brought before the Maine Supreme Court system by the parents of a 15-year old transgender girl, Nicole Maines, who was refused access to the girls' restroom by her school and was forced to utilize the staff restrooms due to her gender presentation when she was nine years old (*Doe et al. v. Regional School Unit 26*, 2014). Nicole started her social transition

at school the year prior and had initially been allowed by the school to use the girls' restrooms at the beginning of her fifth grade year. However, after just a few months, the school decided to remove her restroom privileges and instead required her to use only the staff restrooms. In January 2014, the Maine Supreme Judicial Court affirmed a previous court ruling that the public school's refusal to allow Nicole access to the girls' restroom violated her rights under Maine's Human Rights Act (5 Maine Revised Statutes Annotated [M.R.S.A.] § 4551-4634, 1971, 2005; *Doe et al. v. Regional School Unit 26*, 2014). This Act not only protects individuals from discrimination based on sexual orientation, which, according to the statute, includes perception of gender identity or expression; but also unlawful educational discrimination on the basis of sex or sexual orientation, as well as equal access to public accommodations (5 M.R.S.A. § 4551-4634, 1971, 2005).

Another lawsuit, filed in May 2014, highlights the alleged sex discrimination and bullying faced by Seth Tooley, a 14-year old transgender boy from Michigan. The lawsuit details Seth's experiences of harassment by peers, such as name-calling and threats, as well as the school's defense of his perpetrators, failure to investigate allegations of harassment, and refusal to intervene on Seth's behalf (*Tooley et al. v. Van Buren Public Schools et al.*, 2015). According to a report by a local online news source, over the course of two years Seth attended four different schools in Michigan where he was subjected to daily verbal harassment and threats, and suffered a kidney infection due to his refusal to use the restroom while at school as a result of a previous incident of bullying (Otzman, 2015). Included in the motion filed by Seth's parents are allegations that the discrimination he faced in all four public schools violated Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which has caused the U.S. government to join

the suit (*Tooley et al. v. Van Buren Public Schools et al.*, 2015). These lawsuits and others like them demonstrate not only a need for additional non-discriminatory and anti-bullying legislation at both the state and federal levels, but also a need for an investigation into the experiences of both the parents and children involved.

Examination of these experiences may offer a unique look into the largely stigmatized and often overlooked population of transgender youth and their families. Therefore, it is the goal of this study to focus on the experiences of the parents of transgender children, and the struggles they face in supporting their children; especially in regards to potential challenges the child and parents may face within school systems. More specifically, with this project, I sought to answer the question: What are the experiences of the parents of transgender children as they interact with schools on behalf of their children?

## CHAPTER TWO. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Sex and Gender Roles

The concepts of sex and gender are both based on social assumptions and expectations that only two sexes or genders exist naturally (Burgess, 2000; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). These two sexes and genders exist in opposition on distinct but related binaries that assume a person can either be female or male (i.e., sex), or a woman or a man (i.e., gender), and that people do not, and cannot, exist in an absence or combination of both (Boskey, 2014; Dietert & Dentice, 2013). For example, it may be difficult for cisgender individuals to understand that someone can have the gender identity of a woman and the assigned birth sex of male because that person's gender presentation does not fit easily into the existing female/woman-male/man binaries of sex and gender. Additionally, the privileges, or inherent advantages, that cisgender individuals live with afford them the ability to remain unaware of genders that exist outside of the gender binary (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). This ability to remain unaware serves to socialize people not to appreciate the complexities of identity as they stretch beyond the existing binaries of sex and gender. Furthermore, assumptions about gender are reflected in pronoun usage, as typically only masculine and feminine pronouns are used in U.S. language (Davis, Zimman, Raclaw, 2014). However, research has a way to honor individuals with more neutral gender presentations with first-person plural as gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., they, their for singular reference; Davis, et al., 2014). For the purposes of this project, first-person plural pronouns will be used to be respectful of the expansive nature of participants' children's gender identities and presentations, in cases where preferred binary pronouns have not been indicated.

The sex and gender binaries are based on heteronormative assumptions and biases that exist in larger social institutions, such as school systems (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Oswald, et al., 2005; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Toomey, et al., 2012). They also come from hierarchical social beliefs that systemically privilege heterosexual and cisgender individuals and behaviors (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Oswald, et al., 2005; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Toomey, et al., 2012), thereby marginalizing people who do not conform. A study by Dietert and Dentice (2013) examines the early socialization of 32 transgender adults and the ways in which they challenged traditional gender roles as children. Results indicated that nearly all participants were expected and encouraged to behave in certain ways based on their assigned birth sex and perceived gender, and at times when they did not behave accordingly, they were encouraged even more strongly (Dietert & Dentice, 2013).

An individual's gender expression and presentation are based primarily on the social norms and expectations that are directly linked to the existing sex and gender binaries (Dietert & Dentice, 2013). Additionally, there is an expectation that these norms will be adhered to regardless of a person's gender identity (Dietert & Dentice, 2013). These gender-biased social norms and expectations include adhering to a particular manner of dress (e.g., dresses, suits), particular likes and dislikes (e.g., cooking, cars), and social mannerisms and interactions (e.g., empathic, withdrawn), as well as expressing gender in a predictable manner (i.e., congruent with assigned birth sex; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). For children, school policies and practices continue to enforce gender conformity based on social expectations of gender performance and expression (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Toomey, et al., 2012). Further, segregation based on perceived gender in social institutions, such as schools (i.e., lining up by boys and girls for

recess, separating into boys and girls for participation in sports), serves to reinforce social expectations of gender (Martin & Ruble, 2009).

For transgender children in particular, the school system's adherence to larger social ideas of what makes a person a girl or a boy, or a female or a male, can create an environment in which they do not feel comfortable, safe, or accepted (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Johnson, et al., 2014; Sausa, 2005; Toomey, et al., 2012). In a study by Toomey et al. (2012), student perceptions of safety for peers who did not appear to adhere to the binaries of sex and gender were assessed. Utilizing data from a previous study in which data regarding school harassment were gathered from middle and high school students, Toomey et al. (2012) found that over half of their sample indicated that they felt their school was safe for their transgender peers. These results indicated a discrepancy between reports of school victimization and perceived school safety, which was attributed to the implicit heteronormative values being maintained in school systems (Toomey, et al., 2012). Applying a queer framework to the concept of heteronormativity, however, allows for more understanding of identities that do not fit into the binary definitions that are currently accepted (Oswald, et al., 2005; Toomey, et al., 2012), and may help to dismantle social expectations of identity and behavior based on sex and gender.

### **Gender Identity and Expectations**

Gender identity develops in children by approximately age two (Boskey, 2014; Brill & Pepper, 2008; Burgess, 2000; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007; Ryan, 2009); therefore, clinicians and teachers should be prepared to work with children who express their gender at young ages. Between 18 and 24 months of age, when most children have developed their own internal sense of gender identity, they also begin to develop an awareness of the genders of others, as well as of gender-based social roles (Boskey, 2014; Steensma, Kreukels, de Vries, & Cohen-Kettenis,

2014). The development of gender identity in early childhood not only shapes who a child feels they are internally, but also shapes how they present themselves to others (e.g., dress, toy preferences; Elmore & Oyserman, 2012; Martin & Ruble, 2009). Awareness of social expectations of gender often leads transgender children to be more aware of, and perhaps vocal about, their experiences regarding the gender stereotypes they face based on their perceived gender (Boskey, 2014; Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006; Steensma, et al., 2014). Westernized social expectations of gender, as well as adherence to the sex and gender binaries, are used as a framework from which to view the development of gender (Martin & Ruble, 2009); however, they seem unhelpful when a larger variety of identities are considered.

Children who are required to adhere to social gender norms may develop mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, which are not related to their internal feelings of gender at all, but are instead due to a larger social inability to be accepting of their gender (Lev, 2004; Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006; Meyer, 2003). For these children, treatment of mental health issues may end up focusing on attempting to alter their gender identity to align with their assigned birth sex as a way to alleviate depression or anxiety (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006). In a review of existing literature on identity development of gender expansive children, Mallon and DeCrescenzo (2006) discuss the concept of “realness” (p. 224) in relation to gender identity, which they indicate is more about feeling authentic internally than it is about being correctly perceived by others. As identity is crucial to well-being (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006), helping children to feel more ‘real’ may be the most important aspect of supporting transgender children. For many families, a compromise is often made between parents and child to allow them to dress and act in a manner that best fits them at home; but when outside the home, the expectation remains that they present themselves as the gender others perceive them to be (Mallon &

DeCrescenzo, 2006). However, according to Brill and Pepper (2008), parents have reported that symptoms of depression and anxiety reduced when their children were allowed to express themselves in accordance with their gender identity at all times.

Although gender identity develops in early childhood, it is also important to consider the impact adolescence may have on continued identity development (Clark, et al., 2014). Puberty begins in adolescence and the development of secondary sex characteristics takes place (Boskey, 2014; Delemarre-van de Waal & Cohen-Kettenis, 2006). As such, adolescence can be a particularly difficult time in transgender children's lives, as the development of sex characteristics that may conflict with their own internal sense of self can be distressing (Boskey, 2014; Burgess, 2000; de Vries, Steensma, Doreleijers, & Cohen-Kettenis, 2010; Delemarre-van de Waal & Cohen-Kettenis, 2006). For children who identify as transgender through adolescence and into adulthood, discomfort between sex and gender can increase with the onset of puberty (Boskey, 2014; Burgess, 2000; de Vries, et al., 2010; Delemarre-van de Waal & Cohen-Kettenis, 2006). According to Burgess (2000), a transgender adolescent's ability to cope with the physical and psychological changes brought on by puberty is shaped by how pressured they feel to conform to social norms. Adolescents who feel they are under immense pressure to conform may have more difficulties than adolescents who feel they are under minimal pressure (Burgess, 2000).

For some transgender children, regardless of how pressured they feel or how extreme their discomfort is between their sex and gender, medical interventions that allow for pubertal suppression might be prescribed so that they may be able to delay the onset of the development of secondary characteristics (Boskey, 2014; de Vries, et al., 2010; Delemarre-van de Waal & Cohen-Kettenis, 2006; Steensma, et al., 2014). A study by de Vries et al. (2010) assessed the



psychological functioning of 70 transgender adolescents for whom puberty was previously suppressed by medical intervention and found that suppression was helpful in alleviating adolescents' symptoms of depression, anxiety, and anger, as well as behavioral and emotional problems (de Vries, et al., 2010). By halting the development of sex characteristics that are perceived to be incongruent with their gender identity, interventions such as pubertal suppression seek to reduce or eliminate distress thought to be associated with the incongruence between the body and mind of transgender adolescents (de Vries, et al., 2010). However, even focusing on ways to reduce the biological stressors that adolescents may face reinforces heteronormative beliefs that one's sex and gender should match.

Adolescence is a time when children are beginning to develop more rapidly not only physically, but also mentally and socially, as well (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Brown & Rounsley, 1996; Burgess, 2000). Gender roles are enforced differently, and perhaps in some ways even more strongly, during adolescence; therefore transgender teens may find themselves having to work harder to adhere to social norms during adolescence than they had in childhood (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Brown & Rounsley, 1996). The pre-teen (e.g., ages 9 to 12; Brill & Pepper, 2008) to teenage years are packed with self-discovery including planning for the future, social interactions and affiliations, self-esteem and body image development, as well as the prospect of sex and dating (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Brown & Rounsley, 1996; Burgess, 2000). When imagining a future, children seem to have no limitations; however, during adolescence, gender-biased social expectations and norms regarding dating, marriage, having children, and career planning (e.g., shop class for boys and home economics class for girls) are reinforced (Burgess, 2000).

Transgender youth may feel increased pressure to conform to gender norms that do not fit their experiences of themselves leading to low self-esteem or body image (Brown & Rounsley, 1996). Nearly all adolescents deal with issues of self-esteem and body image as they develop, but for transgender teens, adolescence may be a particularly trying time (Brown & Rounsley, 1996). During adolescence, transgender teens may begin to isolate themselves, cover up so that others cannot see their bodies, and withdraw from social activities in order to avoid embarrassment or feelings of distress (Brown & Rounsley, 1996); all of which are common symptoms of minority-related stress (Meyer, 2003). As the majority of social activities and interactions take place within schools during adolescence, school climate and policies may play a large role in the social development of transgender adolescents (Burgess, 2000). Additionally, as schools typically reinforce heteronormative standards that perpetuate sex and gender norms, it is important to also consider the role parents play in assisting their transgender child in navigating school systems.

Historically, the development of a gender that does not appear to align with an individual's assigned birth sex has been deemed problematic, and those who exhibit such identities have been diagnosed with a mental disorder (Lev, 2004, 2006). This medicalized view of gender, which recommends diagnosis and treatment, was first included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 1980), where it remained until the newest version was published in 2014. Gender identity disorder diagnosed not only feelings of distress that may be associated with a person's gender identity not matching their assigned birth sex, but also their entire identity, as it was viewed as contrary to those of cisgender individuals (Boskey, 2014). According to Möller, Schreier, Li, and Romer (2009), anywhere from 5% to 12% of young girls exhibit behaviors typically associated

with male boys and 2.6% to 6% of young boys exhibit behaviors that are typically associated with female girls. However, the development of a gender that does not seem to match one's birth sex and perceived gender continues to be seen as problematic. Although it is the person's gender identity that has been deemed to be the problem, feelings of dysphoria come not from within, but from the stigma of being seen as different due to their gender expression and presentation (Lev, 2004, 2006; McGuire, et al., 2010).

In recent years, an inclusive and affirming approach has begun to replace the medicalized view of gender identity development (e.g., Boskey, 2014; Burgess, 2000; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Lev, 2004, 2006). This approach allows for a more depathologizing and strengths-focused look at gender and sex (Boskey, 2014). Thus, individuals with identities that do not necessarily adhere to a binary may be afforded opportunities to explore identity and gender in a way that may provide a more positive self-identity (Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011), as well as increased resiliency to everyday stressors (McGuire, et al., 2010). A shift toward becoming more affirming of all identities is reflected in the newest version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition* (APA, 2014), because the inclusion of gender dysphoria places emphasis not on a faulty identity, but on the distress caused by incongruent feelings and discomfort between gender identity and perceived gender based on assigned birth sex (APA, 2014; Boskey, 2014). Although this is a good step toward embracing a more inclusive and affirmative approach to gender, additional research in this area may be helpful in continuing to dismantle the heteronormative beliefs upon which a diagnosis regarding gender is based. Continuing to critically examine the heteronormative standards on which gender-related diagnoses are created may render the perceived need for such diagnoses obsolete.

As research has continued to focus more on inclusive and affirming approaches (e.g., Boskey, 2014; Lev, 2004, 2006; Riggle, et al., 2011), the positive aspects of developing a transgender identity have been emphasized. In a study by Riggle et al. (2011), an online survey was completed by 61 individuals between the ages of 18 and 74 years who identified as transgender. Results indicate several positive personal developments occurring as a result of the participants' identifying as transgender, such as having congruency between their sense of self and the expression of that self, self-confidence and resiliency, as well as insight and empathy (Riggle, et al., 2011). In addition, several positive interpersonal developments were found, including stronger relationships with friends, family, and partners, as well as engaging in activism and advocacy for the transgender community (Riggle, et al., 2011). Beyond the need for a more personalized look at gender identity is a need for an inclusive view of gender to be applied on a larger scale. In a literature review of gender identity development in childhood and adolescence, Boskey (2014) proposed including a more comprehensive view of gender identities, not limited by the existing sex and gender binaries, in order to make a variety of identities available and accessible in sexuality education curricula. Additionally, a literature review by Lev (2006) emphasized a need for a less diagnostic view of gender as a way to lessen reliance on sex and gender binaries. These more inclusive approaches to sex, gender, and gender identity lay the groundwork for a larger acceptance of diverse genders.

### **Challenges Facing Transgender Children**

In a 2011 national survey of the experiences of 6,456 transgender individuals, 41% reported having attempted suicide at least one time in their lives; in comparison, 1.6% of the general U.S. population has reported attempting suicide (Grant, et al., 2011). For those individuals surveyed, suicide attempts rose to 51% when they also reported having experienced

harassment and bullying from peers throughout their kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade years (Grant, et al., 2011). This rate rose again to 59% and 76%, respectively, when they reported having experienced verbal and physical harassment at the hands of schoolteachers and staff (Grant, et al., 2011). Additionally, studies have reported that school personnel have often failed or refused to intervene when witnessing acts of harassment against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students by peers (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; McGuire, et al., 2010; Sausa, 2005; Wernick, Kulick, & Inglehart, 2014). For example, in a study by Payne and Smith (2014), school personnel were interviewed regarding their desire and ability to intervene in peer harassment, and results revealed that personnel sometimes felt they were unable to intervene based on the ambiguous or inconclusive nature of school policies. In particular, school personnel in this study reported a fear of losing their job from intervening due to the possibility of having conversations about sex, gender, and sexuality with the children, which are often deemed unacceptable conversations per school policies (Payne & Smith, 2014). Research studies are vital in shedding light on the issue of harassment and bullying of transgender children within the school systems. An increase in awareness of these issues has allowed for more attention to the cases of youth attempting and completing suicide because of these experiences (e.g., Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007).

Increases in media attention have also led to an increase in awareness of the challenges faced by transgender children. In fact, in 2015, there have already been nine nationally reported deaths by suicide by transgender teens and young adults: Eylul (23) from Turkey, Melonie (19) from Maryland, Zander (15) from Georgia, Aubrey (22) from California, Ash (16) from North Carolina, Taylor (18) from Illinois, Blake (18) from North Carolina, Taylor (16) from California, and Sam (15) from Michigan (Dennison, 2015). Since the initiation of the current study, two

more deaths by suicide by transgender teens have been reported nationally: Cameron (15) from Wisconsin and Kyler (13) from California (Brydum, 2015). Not included in these reports are the deaths of transgender teens by homicide or the deaths by suicide and homicide of other LGB teens; however these reports still shed light on the deaths of transgender and/or gender expansive children, as well as on the everyday challenges they, and their families, face.

Social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, and blogs provide a unique look into the personal experiences of transgender children and their parents that would not otherwise be accessible. According to a study by Singh (2013), the use of social media by transgender youth of color allowed them to connect to other transgender youth of color, follow role models (e.g., celebrities, mentors), and find support systems. Social media exists in real time; therefore scholarly research cannot quite keep up. However, popular press, or written and televised media geared toward the general public (e.g., *New York Times*, *Time Magazine*, *NBC Nightly News*), is beginning to catch on to these social changes, as well as the pressing need for these stories to be told on a more global scale (Boskey, 2014). For example, in April 2015, *NBC Nightly News* featured a weeklong series on transgender children, in which a different family's story was highlighted each night.

As a result of the increase in media awareness, more attention has been paid to a need for research on the experiences of the families of transgender children. In response to this need is a growing body of research surrounding transgender children that focuses on a variety of experiences of transgender youth, such as their struggles with substance use and abuse (Reisner, Greytak, Parsons, & Ybarra, 2015), family and community acceptance (Ryan, 2009), as well as self-harm and suicide (Mustanski & Liu, 2013). Additionally, existing research includes clinical perspectives on working with transgender children (Tishelman, et al., 2015). This increase in

research focus has created a platform from which the general public can gain awareness through media. However, many media reports still demonstrate a lack of information as well as a lack of understanding of the more specific experiences and challenges faced by transgender youth and their families.

Furthermore, much of the recent media attention has focused specifically on schools and school policies as transgender children seek to socially transition from one perceived gender to another within the school, as opposed to the experiences of these children and their parents as they maneuver the school systems in order to make transition a possibility (e.g., Wright, 2015). Although media attention is an important contribution to the overall literature on transgender children and their experiences, to date, scholarly research has only just begun to explore the experiences of the parents of transgender children with regard to schools.

### **Experiences of Parents of Transgender Children**

There is currently a lack of scholarly research regarding the experiences of the parents of transgender children. Studies that do present the experiences of parents often do so from the perspective of the child (e.g., Grossman, D'Augelli, Howell, & Hubbard, 2005; Grossman, D'Augelli, & Salter, 2006; Riley, Clemson, Sitharthan, & Diamond, 2013). Due to this lack of information, parents may seek out other knowledgeable resources (e.g., other parents, affirmative therapists, social support networks) in order to better educate themselves on what their child is going through and how best to support them (Brill & Pepper, 2008; Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Johnson & Benson, 2014; Kivalanka, et al., 2014; Lev, 2004, 2006; Riley, et al., 2011; Sansfaçon, Robichaud, & Dumais-Michaud, 2015). Since there is little research that takes the perspectives of parents into account (e.g., Johnson & Benson, 2014; Kivalanka, et al., 2014; Riley, et al., 2011; Sansfaçon, et al., 2015), many parents may also seek the advice of other

parents who have gone through, or are going through, similar experiences (Kovalanka, et al., 2014). Parents of transgender children are faced with many different advocacy roles in raising their children which often include having to educate family and community members on transgender issues (Johnson, et al., 2014; Kovalanka, et al., 2014; Wren, 2002), working with medical professionals regarding the proper care of their child (Johnson, et al., 2014), as well as seeking a variety of support services for their child (e.g., therapist, support groups; Johnson, et al., 2014). In a study by Kovalanka et al. (2014), five mothers detailed their experiences of raising a transgender child before, during, and after the child's social transition. Findings from this first phase of a longitudinal study indicate that through witnessing the transition of their child, the mothers felt they had gone from being uneducated about issues facing transgender children to being experts, which also assisted them in transforming the perspectives of family and community members (Kovalanka, et al., 2014).

Additionally, parents face their own challenges in their journey to understanding and accepting their transgender child (Ehrensaft, 2012; Johnson, et al., 2014). Some challenges that parents face include grieving over the loss of the future they imagined for their child, worrying about how their child will be received by others once they are told about the child's transgender identity, as well as stressors that having a child who lives with such a large social stigma can place on the parent-child and other family relationships (Ehrensaft, 2012, 2013; Johnson, et al., 2014; Riley, et al., 2011; Sansfaçon, et al., 2015; Wren, 2002). Some affirmative parents even face difficult decisions regarding whether or not to continue to have contact with family members and friends who are not accepting of their transgender child (Wren, 2002). Parents, particularly mothers, are also the focus of studies that seek to explore the impacts of parents of transgender children in a more negative, problematic, and blaming way (Jackson & Mannix,



2004; Möller, et al., 2009). Historically, studies regarding the development of gender dysphoria in children have focused on parents as the cause of, and potentially the answer to changing, their child's identity (Wren, 2002). However, more recent studies that look into the experiences of parents of transgender children have demonstrated that parents are developing a more positive and affirming outlook (Johnson, et al., 2014; Sansfaçon, et al., 2015).

Considering the role that parents have in advocating on behalf of their children, it is important to better understand parents' roles in the school systems. It is essential to also consider how well local, state, and federal policies meet the needs of transgender children in school systems to determine what role parents may need to play. In a study by Johnson et al. (2014), six parents and one grandparent raising a transgender child were interviewed about how they cope and find support in dealing with the challenges and concerns they have about the school experiences of their child. Results of this study indicate that caregivers find it difficult to deal with schools that are not accepting or affirming of transgender children (Johnson, et al., 2014). Additionally, results indicate that caregivers are a major source of support for their transgender child and play a significant role in educating other family members, schools, and the communities in which they live (Johnson, et al., 2014). Parents are ultimately responsible for the well-being and betterment of their children (Ryan, 2009; Weinstein, et al., 2012), and in cases where the school systems fail to meet the needs of their transgender child, it falls upon parents to step in and become their child's advocate (e.g., for use of restrooms and locker rooms that match their gender; Johnson, et al., 2014), and ensure their safety (e.g., to intervene in harassment and bullying; Johnson, et al., 2014).

A recent increase in the visibility of transgender children in schools has raised public awareness about safety and policy (Luecke, 2011), as well as a need for advocacy (Sansfaçon, et

al., 2015). This is especially important for transgender children because the support of an affirming parent can have a profound effect on children's abilities to cope with the unique struggles they face daily (Grant, et al., 2011; Riley, et al., 2013). Studies focusing on the experiences of parents of transgender children report that in order to support their children, they might benefit in exploring their own potential feelings of loss and grief (Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Johnson, et al., 2014; Wren, 2002), as well as acceptance of their transgender child (Wren, 2002). They may also attempt to manage the secondary stigma they face as a supportive parent of a transgender child (Johnson & Benson, 2014; Riley, et al., 2011; Sansfaçon, et al., 2015) in order to better advocate for their child (Sansfaçon, et al., 2015). Therefore, parents might look for outside resources to assist them in supporting their child (Johnson & Benson, 2014; Vanderburgh, 2009). Although current literature provides information regarding support services that may be available to, and beneficial for, both transgender children and their parents, the information that exists varies from information sharing between parents (e.g., online communities such as TransYouth Family Allies (TYFA) and Gender Spectrum) to recommendations on how best to care for a transgender child from the perspectives of clinicians and researchers (e.g., Jacob, 2013; Luecke, 2011; Sausa, 2005; Tishelman, et al., 2015). At this point in the scholarly research, however, there is very little on the parental perspectives regarding what works for them and their families, and what does not. Therefore, it is vital that researchers include parents' voices in order to determine what is working, and incorporate them into their research on how to assist these families (Johnson, et al., 2014; Sansfaçon, et al., 2015). Additionally, incorporating parents' voices into scholarly research allows a unique opportunity for a better understanding not only of the parents' experiences, but also of the family dynamics

and lived experiences as well, thus allowing for the ability to provide better support to families (e.g., Grafsky, 2014).

The current literature on the experiences of parents of transgender children includes information on the variety of challenges parents face while raising a transgender child (Riley, et al., 2011); such as the emotional journeys parents take (Ehrensaft, 2013; Gonzalez, Rostosky, Odom, & Riggle, 2013), and the importance of seeking support (Riley, et al., 2013; Rosenberg, 2002; Wren, 2002). Although this research has been vital in gathering some information on the experiences of parents of transgender children, this information has been gathered through adult transgender children's ideas about how parents shaped their childhood experiences (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). Very few studies directly address parent's experiences in raising their transgender children. According to a study by Luvmour (2011), parents found that over time they felt they were able to be less judgmental, more honest, and more supportive of their children. In a study by Grafsky (2014), parents of gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) children who had disclosed their identity to their parents indicated that they had to "create new identities for themselves as the parents of GLB sons or daughters" (p. 47). Examples of studies such as Luvmour (2011) and Grafsky (2014) demonstrate that there is an identity process for parents of LGBT children as much as there is a process for the children themselves. More research detailing parents' own experiences of raising transgender children might offer a way to integrate the needs of parents and families with the needs of their transgender children in order to create a more solid support system for all.

### **Gender Identity and Expression in School**

Transgender children face unique issues surrounding gender identity and expression in schools. These issues include adherence to the school's daily and special event (e.g., prom) dress

codes (Minter, 2012; Sausa, 2005), as well as particular restroom and locker room usage (McGuire, et al., 2010; Minter, 2012; Sausa, 2005). Additionally, transgender children face challenges in the use of chosen names and gender affirming pronouns by peers, teachers, and staff (McGuire, et al., 2010; Minter, 2012; Sausa, 2005), as well as harassment and bullying (Mahdi, Jeverson, Schrader, Nelson, & Ramos, 2014; McGuire, et al., 2010; Minter, 2012; Sausa, 2005). Transgender children challenge the social norms of acceptable gendered behavior, and are often discouraged from expressing their gender in a way that is consistent with their gender identity (Dietert & Dentice, 2013), as it often causes discomfort or confusion for others. It is important, however, to be aware that such gender expansive behaviors and identities are not problematic in and of themselves, but that these behaviors and expressions are deemed problematic as they conflict with socially accepted gender presentations (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; McGuire, et al., 2010; Sansfaçon, et al., 2015). For example, a child who was assigned male at birth but who identifies as a girl may wish to use the girls' locker room to change for gym class. Due to strong social adherence to the gender binary (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009), this young girl might be barred from utilizing restrooms and locker rooms that align with her gender identity and instead be forced to utilize the ones that match her assigned birth sex; which may not only be humiliating, but also unsafe for her (Johnson, et al., 2014; Sausa, 2005; Toomey, et al., 2012).

The 2013 National School Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network (GLSEN), found that over a third (37.8%) of students surveyed felt unsafe at school due to their gender expression. For parents of transgender children, issues of safety and policy within schools are often of great concern, especially in regard to the stigma their child may likely face (Kualanka, et al., 2014). Although non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies

do exist within several school systems across the U.S., it is often a surprise to parents when they find out that only particular protections are extended; such as discrimination based on sex, but not based on gender identity or expression (Sansfaçon, et al., 2015). Approximately two-thirds of states in the U.S. lack non-discrimination and anti-bullying laws that are inclusive of gender identity and gender expression (GLSEN, 2013; Minter, 2012; Sausa, 2005). Although educators have an ethical responsibility to provide all students with a “safe and healthy” learning environment (Jacob, 2013, p. 99), current data show that only 16 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.), have adopted anti-bullying laws that specifically prohibit the bullying or harassment of students based on sexual orientation and gender identity (GLSEN, 2013). Of those states, however, only 13 states and D.C. also carry nondiscrimination laws that are designed to protect students on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (GLSEN, 2013; Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010).

Additional protection for the rights of children in schools is provided in Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, a federal anti-discrimination bill that prohibits discrimination based on sex for any public school that receives federal funding. The Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education’s Revised Sexual Harassment Guidance (2012) further clarifies that Title IX covers gender-based discrimination by proxy if the harassment is “sufficiently serious to deny or limit a student’s ability to participate in or benefit from the program” and is based on the “victim’s failure to conform to stereotyped notions of masculinity and femininity” (p. v; U.S. Department of Education, 2001, 2012). This statute is key for parents to know and understand when advocating for their transgender children because it offers them an opportunity to challenge the schools in a way that may not be possible without such federal policies. However, given the wording of the policy, it is possible that the definitions of

masculinity and femininity, as well as the student's ability to participate in, or benefit from, the programs offered at school, may be open for interpretation causing additional issues for both the parents and the children. Incorporating research from parents' experiences of advocating for their children in school systems into a policy like this might make it more applicable to the lives of transgender children and their families.

In 2013, California passed legislation allowing transgender children to participate in school activities in a manner that aligns with their gender identity, not just that of their assigned birth sex (GLSEN, 2013); however, very few states to date have followed suit. Though many lawsuits have been filed against schools in order to compel them to implement a more inclusive and affirming non-discrimination policy, it is important to remember that not all families are in a position, financial or otherwise, to utilize litigation as a resource to effect change (Sausa, 2005). Given that many schools do not enforce protective policies unless a transgender child enrolls or transitions from one perceived gender to another while enrolled in the school, it seems that schools do not typically review related policies unless prompted by an advocate for a particular child (Kovalanka, et al., 2014; Luecke, 2011; Payne & Smith, 2014).

Although relatively few national changes have been made to date, strides are being made to create gender inclusive policies and practices within individual school systems. Many states and school boards have adopted transgender inclusive policies that assist in making their schools an affirming environment for transgender children by guaranteeing them the same rights their cisgender peers are provided (e.g., Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition, Illinois High School Association, Minnesota State High School League, New York City Department of Education). Many other schools have adopted policies in order to become more affirming and inclusive (e.g., Herberich Primary School in Akron, Ohio; Stevens Point Area Public School

Board in Stevens Point, Wisconsin; Louisville High School in Louisville, Kentucky), and parents are often involved in these efforts (e.g., Saint Paul Public Schools (MN), California Safe Schools Coalition, Safe Schools for Wisconsin's Transgender Youth project; Toomey, et al., 2012).

A study by Luecke (2011), which gathered and analyzed journal entries, lesson plans, and interviews with transgender children, their caregivers, and school personnel, emphasizes the importance of school personnel and parents collaborating in order to create an affirming and supportive environment for all children, but especially for transgender children. Based on the information gathered throughout the study, a call to action was made for schools to “take the lead” when it comes to supporting transgender children and their families (Luecke, 2011) by educating themselves and being open to learning. According to Luecke (2011), for schools to support transgender children, working together with one another “is crucial to a positive transition experience...and the support of the principal is key” (p. 152). However, Luecke (2011) also warns schools not to rely too heavily on the parents and inadvertently placing additional responsibility on parents to educate the school regarding their transgender child.

Similarly, Sausa (2005) provides recommendations for schools at different levels so that they can be better prepared in meeting the needs of transgender children. The recommendations for middle schools included challenging gender norms and avoiding activities that force children to participate based on gender norms, as well as addressing harassment and bullying immediately and adding more inclusive and affirming educational information to the curricula (Sausa, 2005). Collaboration between school personnel and parents of transgender children may influence schools to create and enforce policies and practices that provide children with a safer school environment.

## **Transgender Children in Schools**

Due to the general lack of inclusive policies in schools, parents of transgender children are required to work with school staff, administrators, and boards in order to ensure a safe environment in which their child may receive an education (Johnson, et al., 2014). Parents may feel compelled to meet with teachers, principals, and superintendents in order to educate them and assist in creating a welcoming, affirmative, and supportive environment for their child (Dykstra, 2005; Johnson & Benson, 2014; Kusalanka, et al., 2014; Slesaranksy-Poe, Ruzzi, Dimedio, & Stanley, 2013). According to research, parents' needs often change as they navigate the realization, increased understanding, and acceptance of their child's gender identity (Johnson, et al., 2014; Kusalanka, et al., 2014; Menvielle, 2012; Riley, et al., 2011). Research findings on realization, understanding, and acceptance include the changes parents, children, families, and communities go through (Kusalanka, et al., 2014), as well as a desire by all parties for more education (Johnson, et al., 2014).

Navigating realization, understanding, and acceptance of their children's gender identity may also allow parents to realize that their child's nonconformity to social standards of gendered behavior and expression may lead to resistance from members of the community, and even within the school system. Studies have shown that the support of an accepting and affirming parent, or even a parent who is simply less rejecting of their transgender child, can greatly increase not only a transgender child's lifespan by reducing their likelihood of attempting or completing suicide, but their quality of life, as well (Ryan, 2009; Weinstein, et al., 2012). A study by Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, and Sanchez (2010) gathered information regarding family acceptance and positive and negative youth adjustment by analyzing data from in-depth interviews of 53 Latino and non-Latino white LGBT adolescents and their families. Family



acceptance was measured by answers to questions such as “How often did any of your parents/caregivers appreciate your clothing or hairstyle, even though it might not have been typical for your gender?” (Ryan, et al., 2010, p. 207). Positive adjustment was measured by answers to questions regarding self-esteem, social support, and general health while negative adjustment was measured by answers regarding depression, substance abuse, sexual behavior risk, and suicidal thoughts or behaviors (Ryan, et al., 2010). The study found that reports of greater family acceptance were associated with more positive self-esteem, more social supports, and better general health, as well as reductions in depression, substance abuse, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Ryan, et al., 2010).

Parents often turn to the Internet for information and support to deal with a lack of general knowledge about the issues facing transgender children (Kovalanka, et al., 2014; Riley, et al., 2013). Parents have reported feeling less isolated when connected to a network of other parents of transgender children via the Internet (Riley, et al., 2013). Parents have reported finding a variety of online networks helpful (e.g., *Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays* (PFLAG); GLAAD (formerly *Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation*). In particular, TransYouth Family Allies (TYFA) is a helpful online resource that is often utilized by parents of transgender children as their website provides parenting tips, recommended readings for parents, utilization of media for education purposes, as well as information on becoming an effective advocate. Preparing for a potential need for advocacy on behalf of their child is likely what encourages parents of transgender children to step in and develop strategies for dealing with problems when they occur (Ryan, 2009).

Although families of transgender children and children living with various physical and mental disabilities face very different barriers when it comes to their daily lives, research shows

that parents may go through similar experiences in supporting and advocating for their children (Kerr & McIntosh, 2000). These experiences are analogous to those of parents of transgender children because unlike barriers based on race and socioeconomic status, for example, parents of children with physical or mental disabilities do not necessarily have a shared experience of living with the same ability status (Kerr & McIntosh, 1998). Johnson (2000) outlined findings similar to the realization, understanding, and acceptance expressed by parents of transgender children in that parents emphasized talking to their child about their disability, working through their own emotions, finding support and reaching out to others, and advocating for their child. In a personal account of raising a child with a visual impairment, Costantino (2010) discussed having to educate the schoolteacher regarding the visual aids necessary for her child to be successful in the classroom. Unlike parents of transgender children, however, parents of children living with various disabilities are currently offered accommodation assistance within the schools as regulated by government (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA], 1990, 2006), which provides additional resources not currently offered to parents of transgender children. Due to limited implementation and enforcement of non-discrimination policies and practices, parents often seek legislative support in order to handle the issues they and their transgender families face daily.

Parental support has been found to be vital in the promotion of well-being in a transgender child (Sansfaçon, et al., 2015; Weinstein, et al., 2012; Wren, 2002). For the parents of transgender children, however, incidents of harassment and discrimination can create feelings of helplessness in assisting their child in navigating issues that the parents may feel should not exist in the first place. For parents who are affirming of their child's identity, this can be especially difficult as they may find it difficult themselves to maneuver, and find support,

regarding the social stigma that faces both them and their transgender child (Johnson & Benson, 2014; Riley, et al., 2011; Sansfaçon, et al., 2015). Not only may parents find it difficult and frustrating to have to educate family members, peers, community members, doctors, school staff, and others on issues that face gender expansive children and families (Riley, et al., 2011), but they must also remain a pillar of support for their child (Sansfaçon, et al., 2015).

Given the struggles that transgender children face in their schools, parents have an opportunity to play a central role in advocating for their transgender child's needs. Therefore, the goal of this study is to focus on the experiences of parents of transgender children, and the struggles they face in supporting their children within the school systems.

## **CHAPTER THREE. METHODS**

This study utilized a subset of data from a larger study focused on the experiences of parents raising a transgender child. Although only one question regarding participants' experiences with their children's school systems was asked in the original study, many participants shared detailed stories of their experiences with school systems. For this study, a phenomenological approach was used to better understand the experiences these parents discussed regarding their involvement with their child's school systems.

A phenomenological approach allows for a rich personal description of lived experiences (Patton, 2002), as well as of the meanings participants attribute to those experiences by “allow[ing] participants to define phenomena for themselves, and to describe the conditions, values, and attitudes they believe are relevant to that definition for their own lives” (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005, p. 72). Additionally, a phenomenological approach to data collection and analysis offers a unique opportunity for the researcher to “see the world through the participants' eyes” (Daly, 2007, p. 219), thereby emphasizing the connection and sense of shared experience between participant and researcher. Phenomenology is also particularly helpful in the study of underserved populations, such as the parents of transgender children, as it requires in-depth interviews and thick descriptions of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007) in a manner that maintains rigorous data reliability and validity (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Following the immersive learning strategies of phenomenological analysis (Daly, 2007; Patton, 2002; Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005), this study utilized a queer-feminist theoretical framework from which to examine the data. This particular framework is especially important in working with data collected from underserved populations, as it allows for a more in-depth and

critical look into the systematic oppression that exists within the various social locations in which underserved individuals and families live (Creswell, 2007; Marinucci, 2010).

### **Queer Theory**

In keeping with a phenomenological research approach, queer theory focuses on a patriarchal and heteronormative justification of oppression of others (Marinucci, 2010) from a systemic perspective. In this way, queer theory allows for the critique and deconstruction of a variety of long-standing oppressive expressions (e.g., racism, sexism, heterosexism; Creswell, 2007; Marinucci, 2010), which can be even more directly applied to the performance of gender and the oppression of those who do not fit into the approved social standards of expression. Larger social institutions, such as schools, have the ability to create an environment that perpetuates and solidifies the dominant discourse (Dietert & Dentice, 2013) that the expression of a gender unrelated to one's assigned birth sex is wrong. Queer theory assists in examining how existing socially enforced binaries of sex and gender create a divide between what is socially considered to be "normal" and "deviant" behavior (Oswald, Kuvalanka, Blume, & Berkowitz, 2009). A queer theoretical framework can help dismantle these gender phenomena by taking a critical approach to the social norms, rather than perceive the person to be problematic (Creswell, 2007). This, in turn, may assist in creating a more affirmative discourse surrounding gender, gender identity, and gender performance.

### **Feminist Theory**

Although queer theory seeks to deconstruct and dismantle dominant discourses that exist and contribute to the reinforcement and perpetuation of the oppression of others; the main focus of feminist theory is to deconstruct and dismantle the oppression and marginalization of individuals based on sex and gender (Marinucci, 2010). Feminist constructs provide an alternate

way of viewing relationships between sex and gender, inequalities that exist between and among the two (Marinucci, 2010), and the inadequacy of current legal and social policies in addressing such inequalities (McFarland, 2001; Minter, 2012). A feminist theoretical orientation is valuable for this current study because of its focus on the interplay of sex and gender in social institutions.

### **Queer-Feminist Lens**

The utilization of a queer-feminist lens guided this study, as it provided researchers with a theoretical basis for critically viewing the gender paradigm within which each participant, as well as the researchers, operates. Working from a queer-feminist lens requires transparency and intentionality on the part of the researchers in creating an environment for participants that assures them that the research team is interested in their stories. During recruitment for the larger study, participants were given information regarding the affirming and nonjudgmental stances the researchers held regarding sex and gender. Furthermore, throughout the participation in the interview, the researcher offered to connect participants with outside resources upon request, demonstrating a continued adherence to a queer-feminist framework. Additionally, applying a queer-feminist lens to the results allowed for deconstruction of the experiences and an inclusion of the effects that larger social standards of behavior and presentation have on gender performance (Oswald, et al., 2009).

### **Researcher Reflection**

In order to remain as minimally biased as possible, it is especially important for the researcher to remain reflexive throughout the research process. This is vital because the goal of qualitative research is to provide an in-depth look into individual and group life by capturing and appropriately relaying the personal experiences of others. Reflexivity is the process of reflecting on one's own privilege, power, bias, perspective, and assumptions in order to consider in what

ways they may influence the researcher's collection and interpretation of data (Fischer, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Reflexivity is a particularly important aspect of qualitative research as it allows for a more in-depth analysis of the role of the researcher in gathering, interpreting, and summarizing the data collected (Fischer, 2009; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Reflexivity offers an opportunity for researchers to explore the ways in which their own life experiences and beliefs have shaped and impacted how they may interpret and make meaning of the experiences of themselves and others (Fischer, 2009; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Approaching this project from a queer-feminist perspective makes it even more vital that I am continuously reflexive and attentive to any biases I may have or may encounter, and how those biases shape my interpretation or understanding of the data.

As a cisgender, White, heterosexual, able-bodied, and economically stable woman I have inherent privileges that afford me the ability to remain unaware of the lives and struggles of those who do not have the same privileges. However, having been raised by parents who were not only supportive, but who were also aware of inherent social dynamics, privilege, and power, I was instilled with a strong sense of social justice at an early age. Additionally, I have had the pleasure of meeting individuals who have struggled with their sexual orientation or their gender identity in ways that pushed me to pursue my education to be a licensed couple and family therapist. My sense of social justice and my belief in the importance of offering therapeutic services that emphasize social justice and feminism drove me to intentionally seek a couple and family therapy training program that focused on LGBT affirmative practices. As a long-time ally for the LGBT community, and as someone with a particular interest in issues related to transgender individuals and families, I was drawn to participate in in the larger project from which this data comes as a research assistant. While working with another research assistant to

review and transcribe all 22 interviews, I was afforded a unique opportunity to hear the experiences of these parents firsthand. As I transcribed, I witnessed the strength of their stories, their passion for advocacy, as well as the injustices many faced in their experiences with their children's schools.

My supportive stance has already been evident in the manner by which I collected and discussed the literature for my review, as well as how I have utilized my education and research background to further my understanding of the unique set of circumstances transgender children and their families often face. One way my identification as an ally has already influenced me as a researcher is in how I view the participants in this study. I have always believed that parents and caregivers have the important task of guiding their children through life in a supportive and non-judgmental way. The participants in this study reported being supportive of their children at the time of the interviews; I hold the supportive parents in the highest regard, as parents often have trouble being accepting and affirmative of thoughts and behaviors in their children that appear to counter social norms.

Additionally, I believe that it is the job of schools to provide an environment that is conducive of creating happy, well-balanced children so that they can grow into well-educated, successful adults and respectable members of society. Beliefs such as those I have outlined here influence the ways in which I may view and interpret the data and may inadvertently bias my findings in a way that supports my beliefs regarding children, parents, and schools. However, by remaining cognizant of the position I hold as a researcher I hope to continue to allow my work to be guided, but not restricted, by the compassion and respect I have for the participants and their families.



## Methods

### Participant Recruitment and Sample Description

This project utilized secondary data from a larger research study that examined the experiences of parents who were, at the time of the interviews, raising a transgender child. Participants from the original study were initially gathered using snowball sampling, in which participants recruited for the study were asked to refer other potential participants, due to the uniqueness and sometimes inaccessibility of this particular population. Fliers were distributed to local and regional LGBT organizations and support groups via email requesting that individuals interested in participating contact the researchers. Participants contacted Dr. Kristen Benson via email or by phone to set up an initial phone interview in order to verify that the participants met the requirements of the study. It was required that participants were parents or caregivers in a parental role and were parenting a child between the ages of 7 and 18 years who identified as transgender, gender creative, or did not conform to social binary norms of gender. Participants also needed to live in the U.S., speak English, and have phone or Internet access. Informed consents were completed online. Upon completion of the required paperwork, an in-depth interview was set up and completed either via phone or online chat, based on the participant's communication preference.

The sample included 23 participants, of whom 21 were women, one was a man, and one identified as transgenderqueer. Nearly all participants in this project were women in a mothering role with their transgender child ( $n = 22$ ), and one was in a fathering role. Although one additional man did set up an interview, only the child's mother spoke with the researcher. The only father in the sample participated in the interview together with his wife.

Caregiver identities within the participant sample varied: 16 participants indicated they were the biological parents of the children, five participants were adoptive parents, and two participants were grandparents, all of whom were responsible for, or involved in, the parenting of a transgender child. Participants ranged in age from 31 to 55 years, ( $M = 44.5$ ,  $SD = 7.74$ ) and discussed their children who ranged in ages from 7 to 18 years. Participants described their racial identity as Latino(a)/Hispanic/Chicano(a) ( $n = 1$ ), Biracial/Multiracial ( $n = 2$ ), White/Caucasian ( $n = 13$ ), or did not indicate a racial identity ( $n = 7$ ). The majority of participants ( $n = 15$ ) were highly educated, indicating that they had completed at least some college. All participants, however, indicated a supportive and gender affirming parenting stance. However, this is likely due to the larger study's recruitment through LGBT-affirmative advocacy organizations.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected using in-depth interviews completed via a secure online chat or by phone as part of a larger qualitative study. Initially all interviews were to be completed via online chat following the example of van-Eeden-Moorefield, Proulx, and Pasley (2008), whose study on the experiences of gay men utilized an online model for questioning that offered participants more anonymity than traditional in-person methods of data collection (Mustanski, 2001). However, as several participants began requesting to complete the interview via phone instead, that option was offered and utilized. An interview guide served as a basis for asking each participant the same questions, but it also allowed for the researcher to engage in a more fluid conversational style with each participant (Patton, 2002), thereby encouraging participants' sharing of information. The in-depth interview guide included initial questions paired with probative follow-up questions designed to invite clarification or further details from the participant (e.g., "How have you handled [child name] gender expression at [child name]

school?” and “What has that been like?;” “Who in your life has been most supportive?” and “How have they shown support?;” “Can you tell me a little bit about what that has been like for you and your family?” and “Are there any specific events that stand out in your mind?” [see Appendix A]).

Following completion of the phone interviews, each interview was transcribed and pseudonyms were assigned to each participant. Transcripts were mailed or emailed back to the participants for review. Participants were asked to provide any additional clarifications they deemed necessary so that their stories were accurately portrayed. Although parents’ involvement with schools was not the primary focus of the larger study from which this data was collected, participants frequently discussed their involvement in their children’s schools. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I reviewed each transcript in its entirety in order to gather data regarding parents’ experiences with school systems and used thematic analysis to develop themes that emerged from among the experiences of the participants.

### **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was used to develop themes that emerged in the data. Using the 6-phase, step-by-step guide to thematic analysis created by Braun and Clarke (2006), the first step in analyzing data via thematic analysis was to familiarize myself with the data. Given that I have already transcribed many of the interviews, this process had already begun; however, I continued to become familiar with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts. Next, I read through the transcripts a third time while highlighting and looking for basic initial codes that appeared to be present in each (Braun & Clarke, 2006). By including notes in the margin regarding my thoughts on the initial coding and themes that appeared to be developing, I kept track of where and how these themes seemed to develop in the data, in order to preserve the content surrounding

the potential themes. The third step included initial comparison and contrast between participant transcripts to see if there were any larger themes that seemed to develop among the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this stage, it was important to create thematic maps that allowed me to better analyze the potential connections among each transcript, and identify connections between larger themes and sub-themes that existed.

Upon completion of the initial theme gathering, I began the process of reviewing the collated data extracts to be sure that they did, in fact, fit the larger themes established (Braun & Clarke, 2006), or if they might have been best suited in connection with a different theme altogether. In cases where the data did not seem to fit the theme, further analysis was done in order to re-code the data and re-evaluate the themes, so as to be sure the data fit the themes appropriately. After having established a satisfactory thematic map of the data in each of the transcripts, further definition and refining of the themes took place (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The goal of this phase was to verify that relevant and concise themes provided thick descriptions of the data presented in the transcript of the interview (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2007). Finally, after considering all themes and sub-themes and comparing and contrasting them in a way that offered a more relevant and concise look into the data, I began the final analysis and report of the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Trustworthiness**

The use of a phenomenological framework requires in-depth interviews and thick descriptions of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2007) in a manner that maintains rigorous data reliability and validity (Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005). Reliability and validity standards for quantitative research vary greatly from those of qualitative research; for the latter, reliability and validity standards are combined into trustworthiness (Patton, 2002). Trustworthiness

incorporates several aspects of research that promote credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009).

### **Credibility**

One criterion for establishing trustworthiness is credibility, which demonstrates a high level of confidence in the truth of the findings. In particular, credibility offers a way to ensure that the findings are reflective of the participants' realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the larger study on parenting, from which this data is gathered, member checks were used to promote the credibility of the findings by having participants read and verify that the transcript from their interview accurately reflected their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore, incorporating the views of each researcher and participating in peer debriefings will promote credibility in trustworthiness by considering the data from multiple perspectives to be sure that the results accurately reflected the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009).

### **Transferability**

Transferability, a second criterion for establishing trustworthiness, is the ability to apply the findings across contexts. Transferability is most often achieved by the gathering of a high level of detail from participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, the in-depth participant interviews provided rich, thick descriptions of the participants' experiences, which promoted trustworthiness by providing transferability of the findings.

### **Dependability**

A third criterion for establishing trustworthiness is dependability, which is the ability to demonstrate that the findings are consistent and could be replicated by other researchers. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), dependability and credibility are closely linked together; therefore demonstration of credibility assists in demonstrating dependability. For the purposes of

this study, an in-depth methodological description, as well as the interview guide (Appendix A) has been provided to promote dependability. Additionally, incorporating peer debriefings during data analysis will contribute to dependability as they contribute to the credibility of the findings.

### **Confirmability**

A fourth and final criterion for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is confirmability, or the extent to which the findings are shaped by the participants as opposed to potential researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability can be achieved in a variety of ways, such as through obtaining thick descriptions of participants' experiences and member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), as well as researcher reflexivity (Merriam, 2009). For this study, participants were asked to participate in member checks by reviewing their transcripts for accuracy. They were also offered the opportunity to remain in contact with the researcher after the initial interview to discuss any questions, concerns, or comments they had regarding their experience of the interview, the study, or any published results, further demonstrating confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002).

As a part of the research team, I also assisted in transcribing the interviews, allowing me the opportunity to have a first-hand look into the data that were collected. Having heard the experiences of the participants directly offered a unique and captivating perspective that simply reviewing the transcripts could not have provided. This put me in a position to be more able to reflect not only upon the words, but also the tone of the participants, thereby providing a view of the participants' stories that more accurately captured their depth and breadth. In order to minimize potential researcher biases, however, during data analysis, two researchers compared and discussed their findings through a peer debriefing which allowed for multiple perspectives regarding the data to be considered. In these peer debriefings, researchers engaged in

accountability conversations about the socialization aspects of gender and gender identity, as both researchers identify as cisgender. Additionally, continuous reflexivity of the researchers was used to assist in better limiting any personal biases from influencing the findings (Merriam, 2009).

For the purposes of this project, participants' interview responses regarding their experiences with schools and school staff members were analyzed. Analysis included direct participant responses to the initial and probative follow-up questions regarding school experience. The initial and follow-up questions from the interview guide regarding school experiences were: "How have you handled [child name] gender expression at [child name] school?" and "What has that been like?". Also included in analysis were participant responses to other questions in which parents also discussed their experiences with schools and school staff members. An example of initial and follow-up questions from the interview guide that were not geared specifically toward the participant's experiences with school, but that many participants also discussed their experiences with the school in response to were: "Can you tell me a little bit about what that [parenting a child who does not conform to gender norms/expectations] has been like for you and your family?" and "Are there any specific events that stand out in your mind?". The research question for this project highlighted these experiences by asking what are the experiences of parents of transgender children as they interact with their children's school systems?

## CHAPTER FOUR. RESULTS

Data analysis revealed three primary categories regarding the experiences of parents as they interacted with schools on behalf of their children: experiences with gender inclusive schools, experiences with gender evolving schools, and experiences with gender restrictive schools. The experiences of parents who expressed that the school was providing their child a safe educational environment were included in the gender inclusive schools category.

Experiences of parents who discussed the ways schools made changes due to their interactions were included in the category of gender evolving schools. The experiences of parents who recounted facing various challenges and barriers in their interaction with schools were included in the category of gender restrictive schools. In order to be respectful of all participants and their children, pronouns stated in direct quotes are the preferred pronouns for the child indicated by the parents at the time of their interviews, regardless of the child's assigned sex or perceived gender.

The following results are organized by category and further broken down into themes and subthemes relevant to each category. Although these categories of parent experiences may appear symmetrical, it is important to note that the experiences presented in each category are inequitably distributed. Fortunately, the majority of parents in this study reported having had experiences that fit into the categories involving gender inclusive and gender evolving schools. Although experiences with gender restrictive schools were less prevalent among the participants in this study, the experiences with those schools were more detrimental to the families. Additionally, many parents reported having had multiple experiences with schools, both with the same school, and also with different schools; therefore, some parents reported having had experiences that fit into multiple categories. For the purposes of this study, parents' experiences



were captured and relayed in a way that emphasized the impact of experiences, as opposed to the quantity of experiences; therefore parents' experiences are not necessarily evenly distributed throughout the categories.

### **Parents' Experiences with Gender Inclusive Schools: *"They always got it."***

Many parents in the sample discussed their satisfaction with schools that provided their child a safe educational environment. In particular, parents often discussed the importance of welcoming and supportive schools. Two main themes of parents' experiences with gender inclusive schools emerged: (1) experiences with gender inclusive policies and practices and (2) experiences with gender inclusive climates.

### **Experiences with Gender Inclusive Policies and Practices**

This first theme outlines parents' experiences interacting with schools that have established gender inclusive policies and practices. Parents typically classified these schools as both welcoming and supportive. According to the parents in this study, gender inclusive policies, such as non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies, were important in that they made statements that encouraged gender inclusive practices. Parents described the implementation of gender inclusive practices as those that enforced the existing policies, such as teachers and other school staff members intervening in bullying. Parents described how the presence and enforcement of such policies and practices encouraged schools to be affirming and inclusive of transgender students, thus creating a safe educational environment for their children.

Parents in this sample most often discussed their satisfaction with schools in enforcing non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies. These parents experienced satisfaction because the schools took initiative to respond to incidents of discrimination and bullying as they became aware of them, as opposed to relying solely on the parents to intervene. One mother recounted

how the school proposed to handle any potential instances of bullying of her 8-year old transgender daughter from peers and from peers' parents by enforcing their anti-bullying policy:

The school was completely on board with saying if any kids bully [child's name] it's gonna be stopped and if the parents don't stop, then they're gonna be called into the office.

Another mother recounted a situation in which the students at her 17-year old transgender daughter's school passed around a petition to ban her from using the girls' restroom at school. Due to the implementation of a non-discrimination policy, her mother stated that "...the school was supportive – I called the school and they said, "we're squashing this right here."

The mother of an 8-year old transgender girl discussed a similar situation in which the school's lawyer attempted to ban her daughter from using the girls' restroom. In response, this mother contacted the school and the superintendent followed through on altering existing policies in order to allow her daughter to use the girls' restroom:

Initially, the lawyer for the school district said that she couldn't use the girls' bathroom. This mom, who was the superintendent, immediately put before the board some very supportive – from Safe Schools – papers about how to support a child in school; using bathrooms, but also talking about their name and how to use their name in the data and all kinds of stuff. And it was a pretty sweeping and huge change. There was no argument against it and the board voted 5 to 0 for 'em and by Christmas time we had new rules. It was pretty sweet.

Parents also discussed how the school's commitment to diversity was key in providing their children with a safe educational environment. In particular, parents in this sample reflected

on how gender inclusive practices assisted in creating a welcoming and supportive school for their children. The mother of a gender expansive child going into the sixth grade stated:

I just see that this school and the educators are coming from a very holistic, whole-child, kind of perspective and they're very committed to creating safety and their language around celebrating diversity.

One mother, the parent of a 9-year old gender expansive child, recalled that her child's preschool was supportive of her child, regardless of their choices in clothing: "We went to a preschool that cared less what my son wore. They always got it." Another mother recalled how her 10-year old transgender son's school voluntarily participated in professional development training to be more gender inclusive. She stated: "our school system has been really proactive. They've been to some training through Welcoming Schools Organization... [and the facilitator] actually called out our school district as having the most participants for this particular seminar."

Many parents discussed how gender inclusive policies and practices were beneficial for their children. One mother considered how having her 16-year old transgender son enrolled in an inclusive school was also helpful to her as a parent:

The high school has been phenomenal in welcoming [child's name] and adapting for him, and doing whatever he needs to be successful in school. There's no bullying, so it's been helpful for me that I haven't had to deal with any negativity...being his parent – being his mom.

### **Experiences with Gender Inclusive Climates**

This second theme outlines participants' experiences regarding the school's efforts to create a gender inclusive climate for transgender children and their families. Participants discussed how the implementation and enforcement of gender inclusive policies and practices

fostered a safe and supportive school climate for their children. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged: (1) experiences of leadership by teachers and (2) experiences of collaboration.

**Experiences of leadership by teachers.** This first subtheme outlines parents' experiences interacting with particular teachers who exhibited leadership and an affirmative stance regarding their child's gender expression. Parents expressed their gratitude for teachers who were diligent in creating a safe educational environment for their children. The mother of a 6-year old gender expansive child stated: "I would say that her kindergarten teacher absolutely took the lead...the teacher just absolutely made sure those [restroom usage and her child's gender expression] weren't challenges for her." The mother of a 17-year old transgender girl recalled her conversation with the school regarding the use of her daughter's chosen name and pronouns:

The school decided that they would do that, that they were willing to allow her to do that. And, called her by [her chosen name] because I hadn't had a legal name change yet. And they allowed it. And the teachers referred to her as "she" and "her." And that's how we transitioned at school.

Another mother also recalled her interaction with the school regarding the use of preferred name and pronouns for her 12-year old gender expansive child: "...one of her guidance counselors came up with an idea with all the other teachers that they would come up with funny nicknames for her...[or]...refer to her by her initials."

Alternatively, one mother discussed her hesitation in enrolling her 16-year old transgender daughter in a school without knowing the climate: "...I don't know how safe it is. Even though the school has right there on their home page, their non-discrimination against

gender expression and identity, I don't know. We'll find out." Although this mother stated that the school has a non-discrimination policy that includes gender expression and identity, she offered an example of the importance that leadership by teachers plays in creating an inclusive climate for all children.

**Experiences of collaboration.** This second subtheme emphasizes the importance of collaboration between parents and schools in creating a gender inclusive climate. The mother of an 11-year old transgender girl discussed the process she and her family went through in order to move to an area with a school district that would be the "...best fit for the family..." However, her daughter was placed with a teacher at the new school that this mother felt was not a good fit for her. She discussed how the school principal worked to support her daughter by arranging for her to switch teachers. She stated: "...I ended up transferring – well I didn't...it was the principal at the school [who] ended up saying, "you know...I thought she would be the best fit, but what about this one?" Another mother discussed how she and the school worked together to address some of the issues her 14-year old gender expansive child might face in school: "We brainstormed a little bit about the issues that I raised. They tried to see. What's nice also is that I see that they really make an effort to go along the lines that we discussed." The parents of a 6-year old transgender girl, who participated in this study together, recounted the conversation they had with the school about their daughter's social transition. The girl's father discussed the surprise he and her mother experienced from the school's show of support:

When we went to the teachers at [child's name]'s school, it was a little bit surprising to me that, when we said we wanted to transition [child's name] to the pronoun 'she' and (audible inhale) that they were just relieved. (laughs) They

were just like, “oh, good. Wow. Excellent. That’ll totally match what we see on the ground here.”

Several participants also outlined the ways in which a gender inclusive climate extends beyond the classroom. Parents reported that they often felt supported as parents when the school demonstrated support to their child. One mother, the parent of a 6-year old gender expansive child, detailed the support she felt specifically from her child’s kindergarten teacher:

She has the most fabulous kindergarten teacher this year who made sure that she was invited to all the boys’ birthday parties. [T]he kindergarten teacher was just fabulous and I think helped me a ton (chuckles) because we sat down for a conference and she just said “do you believe this is a phase? That [child’s name] is going through?” And I said, “no, I don’t really think it is.” And she said, “I don’t either, I just wanted to check and see what you thought.” And so she really has just sort of helped me.

Another mother indicated that she felt supported when the teachers at her 14-year old gender expansive child’s school were able to put aside their own expressed beliefs about gender and gender roles: “I’m very pleased, because they never gave me an indication that this wasn’t an okay thing. They kept their personal beliefs separate.”

**Parents’ Experiences with Gender Evolving Schools: “*They worked really hard.*”**

Participants in this sample discussed their satisfaction with schools that were willing to make important gender inclusive policy and practice changes after speaking to the parents regarding their transgender children. Participants described the importance of schools that demonstrated a willingness to make changes. From this category, two themes emerged: (1) experiences with schools’ reflections and (2) experiences with schools’ changes.

## **Experiences with Schools' Reflections**

This first theme addresses participants' experiences with schools as they reflect upon their gender-biased policies and practices. As a result of their interactions with the schools, participants discussed how the schools considered the practicality, as well as the impact of their gender restrictive policies and practices.

One mother discussed her experience with the school and how she noticed them taking initiative to go above and beyond the concerns she raised about her 6-year old gender expansive child being comfortable and accepted in school:

[His teacher] used to have the children line up by gender and now she just says, "why would I ever have done that? I have them line up in two rows" and so that they can choose their partner in their row. She's like, "why would I have done that? That didn't matter." And so it clearly has just made her think about classroom practices that are done by gender and how those don't necessarily matter very much. And she just did it to make our daughter feel more comfortable and that's amazing to me.

Another participant recalls how the school worked to accommodate her 10-year old transgender son by considering the gender-biased practices included in their policies and practices; such as allowing children to go by preferred names instead of legal names and utilizing preferred pronouns regardless of the sex or gender listed on the child's enrollment documents. This mother also acknowledged how challenging it might be for school professionals to be mindful of gender-biased practices in schools:

They worked really hard to avoid using all pronouns, and were really, really supportive, but it was really hard for them. So that was a really good experience,

because they, they tried really, really hard to accommodate, and they crossed out nametags because his name hadn't legally been changed yet, and they were just really watchful of every time his legal name would come up, like making sure to catch it and change the – you know, change it on whatever form was being used.

Many of the parents in this sample noted that the ease of their child's transition and acceptance in school was due to the school being reflective about issues and school policies and practices that may create additional challenges for transgender children and their families. The mother of a 12-year old gender expansive child stated: "...[the school staff] have just been incredible in terms of responding with openness [and] a desire to learn." Another participant, the mother of an 11-year old transgender girl, discussed the importance of giving the schools an opportunity to ask questions in order to be reflective of their policies and practices. She recalled the conversation she had with one of her daughter's teachers:

So, I ended up doing an in-service with another teacher and...she asked some pointed questions that were based on ignorance. They weren't intentionally rude, but they were... I asked for, you know, candid dialogue and she was very candid. And she asked questions and she was totally comfortable with the answers and how to proceed and everything was great.

### **Experiences with Schools' Changes**

This second theme addresses participants' experiences with schools as they worked to make changes to their existing gender restrictive policies and practices. As a result of their interactions with the schools, several participants expressed satisfaction with the schools' evolution toward a more gender inclusive environment for all children.



One mother spoke with the school principal regarding her 10-year old child's social transition at school. The principal told her that her child would not be able to attend as a boy yet directed her to speak with the school superintendent. She and her attorney brought informational pamphlets as well as copies of gender inclusive policies implemented in other schools and districts that demonstrated support of their transgender students. Much to her surprise, she found that the superintendent was very supportive:

I mean, not even ten minutes into it, he looked at me, he goes "Oh my gosh, how do we make this happen? This – we need to make this happen. How do we get the policy in place for [child's nickname] to use the boys' bathroom?" (laughs) I had all my paperwork, I was like "What?! I don't need to give – to show you, to cite all these different (laughs) schools?" So, it was like, such a victory for us, that they just heard our story – that he's a parent, I'm a parent, he related, and he changed the policy.

One mother discussed her interaction with the school regarding her 14-year old gender expansive child being allowed to use the boys' restroom:

They gave him permission to use the staff's [bathroom], but he never felt comfortable. And there's an Oregon law that says you can use the bathroom that you identify with. So we copied that information, we took it down to the school, gave it to them, and they said, "Okay, um, go ahead." So he uses the male bathroom now.

For some parents, their involvement with the school regarding gender restrictive policies and practices led to additional opportunities to be involved in the school's evolution toward providing a more gender inclusive environment. The mother of a 10-year old transgender boy

discussed how her son's school had considered some potential issues that may be unique to transgender children in their school and worked to create a more inclusive and accessible restroom for students:

Before we'd met with [the school], they had had a staff bathroom in the hallway and they made it a unisex bathroom. So that was actually positive for the school, as now they have a unisex bathroom. A single stall bathroom that everyone can use [because] not everyone's comfortable using a public bathroom and being in front of people.

This mother went on to state that the teachers at the school took it a step further in expressing to students that the restroom was for everyone's use:

All the teachers communicated to the kids, not that it's for transgender kids, it's just "hey guys, new bathroom in the hallways here. It's not just for teachers – it's – if you want some privacy, this is what you do."

One mother in particular discussed how she was invited by the school to be included in their discussions regarding updating their existing anti-harassment policies:

Our county's school anti-harassment policies were coming up for review – a 5-year review – and they wanted to get the language of gender non-conforming and transgender put into the non-discrimination/non-harassment policy and asked me if I'd go to the meetings. So, I did! And, I went to the first one; I didn't speak at all, but I did actually, I emailed the entire board, and I actually ended up speaking with the Assistant Superintendent and ultimately, we did get that language introduced and passed.

## **Parents' Experiences with Gender Restrictive Schools:**

*"[The school] will only go as far as the law."*

This theme outlines parents' experiences interacting with schools with policies and practices that are gender restrictive. Parents described how the absence of inclusive policies and procedures discounts the rights of transgender students, thereby creating an unsafe educational environment. Within this category, three themes emerged: (1) experiences with discriminatory policies and practices, (2) experiences with discriminatory climates, and (3) experiences of family strain.

### **Experiences with Discriminatory Policies and Practices**

This first theme outlines the struggles parents in this sample discussed in interacting with schools that adhered to policies and practices that were discriminatory or prejudicial toward transgender children. Many parents in this sample expressed frustration with gender restrictive schools because of the challenges and barriers they faced due to their child's gender identity and/or expression. These challenges and barriers not only limited their children's expression of their identities, but also served to create a potentially unsafe and disruptive educational environment based on discrimination. For example, parents voiced concerns over their school's lack of implementation or enforcement of anti-discrimination policies. Because of this, according to parents, the schools lacked the knowledge and resources to best support transgender children and their families, as well. One mother stated that the school refused to allow her 11-year old transgender daughter to enroll in school due to her gender expression:

The superintendent there refused to allow her on campus, so we were not allowed to enroll her in school. Yeah, it's illegal. But there are no anti-discrimination protections extended specifically towards gender identity or expression in

[participant's home state]. [Superintendent's name] is the superintendent for [participant's hometown], said that he will only go as far as the law. So, she was openly discriminated against and just simply she was not allowed on campus.

Other parents discussed how gender restrictive policies and practices, as well as the absence of anti-discrimination policies, often leads to higher incidences of bullying and harassment of transgender children. Due to higher rates of bullying and harassment, several parents also reported having made the choice to pull their transgender children out of school altogether. The mother of a 12-year old gender expansive child stated:

[My child] experienced bullying in the bathrooms by other girls and teasing in the classroom, and the playgrounds were really unsafe as well. After trying to advocate for her on her behalf and make changes [inaudible] principals and vice principals and school counselor and teachers and then the school board, we removed her from that school at grade three.

Another mother recalls how her 6-year old gender expansive child became aggressive toward peers as a result of continued bullying and harassment. This mother ultimately made the decision to remove her child from the school, as well:

Kids in that school were giving her a hard time about it, you know, "you're a girl, you're not a boy." That ended up, I think, making her really anxious and very aggressive and she started like beating the crap out of kids at school. [She was] always getting in trouble. The teacher just was frustrated with her; this was just last semester. So we moved her out of that school. And ever since then she hasn't had any issues at all.

Many parents attributed the challenges and barriers they faced to the schools' uncertainties about how to work with transgender children in specific situations. For example, one mother recounted her experience with the school following an incident in which a teacher denied her 12-year old transgender son safety during a tornado drill:

I guess during the tornado drill they were supposed to go into locker rooms and the teacher in charge just kind of didn't know what to do and wouldn't let [child's name] into the boys' locker room even though that is where he should have gone for the brief five minutes of the drill. He got left out in the hallway or something and mentioned it to me and his dad and so we contacted the school and they were apologetic and said it shouldn't have happened that way, but (audible inhale)...you know, it's a learning process for all of us.

However, physical safety was not the only large concern outlined by the parents in this sample. For many parents, the potential for loss of educational opportunities was just as problematic. The same mother whose child was left in the hallway during a tornado drill also discussed how her son was denied the opportunity to participate in vital school programming because of the school's confusion over his gender identity and expression. His mother stated: "there was a sex education class. Well, they asked us to have [him] opt out because they couldn't figure out where to put him."

Additionally, parents in this sample expressed concerns over how their child is perceived in schools, and how the focus is on their gender identity and expression instead of their education. One mother discussed the ways she would prefer for schools to interact with her child:

Just seeing her as a regular person, like not kind of pathologizing or focusing on difference, but – and not making – but understanding that [child's name]'s

experience of bullying because of – that her experience of bullying shaped her experience in school and her experience with learning, like really understood that, but didn't narrow in on [child's name] being the problem. Or [child's name]'s gender expression not being the problem. The problem being the bullying, and the unsafe learning environment, that impacted her early learning experience.

### **Experiences with Discriminatory Climates**

This second theme outlines the struggles faced by parents of transgender children in schools that have discriminatory environment due to their gender restrictive policies and practices. Parents in this sample discussed how adherence to gender-biased social standards has impacted how their schools reacted to having in their classroom a child who did not adhere to gender-biased behavioral expectations. The mother of a 12-year old gender expansive child stated: “I think [teachers] have certain ways of what they think girls should be and [my daughter] clearly doesn't fit into that mold, so I feel a lot of friction from the teachers.” However, parents also discussed how adherence to gender-biased social standards and norms extends beyond the classroom. Many participants discussed at length their experiences with their children's schools regarding utilization of the public restrooms and locker rooms. One mother in particular expressed her frustration with the school regarding her 17-year old transgender daughter's use of the school's restrooms:

We had a problem with the principal picking on [her]; he was wanting her to go to the Special Ed bathroom. But the Special Ed bathroom is...way too far out of the way. And she would have to explain about why she has to go to the Special Ed bathroom, too.

This mother went on to discuss how the staff at her daughter's school was "all worried about the bathroom. That is like basically the Biggest. Deal. Ever. And that's the one I have to fight all the time." Another mother pointed out the missed opportunity for socialization when her 8-year old transgender daughter was denied access to the girls' restroom:

They're still stuck on the restroom thing – that's something we would like to change – because when it comes to girls, the restroom is more of a social environment. It's not just about going to the bathroom; it's about going to...talk with your peers and just to have a social experience. Girls don't go to the bathroom by themselves. They go in twos and threes.

Additionally, parents' reports of issues of safety in schools were not limited to emergency situations. One mother expressed her concerns regarding the safety of her 14-year old gender expansive child as a result of the school's use of gender-segregated restrooms:

She avoids using restrooms because they are either for boys or for girls. Now at school it has been the last few, maybe many more years that she doesn't go to the restrooms. Just imagine we have a child that goes to school, starts the day at 7:30. She gets there even earlier. She ends her day around 4 or even 5. And all this time she doesn't go to the restroom.

Additionally, several parents in the sample reported initially receiving support after conversations with school staff regarding their child's gender expression, but found that the support was ultimately unhelpful. One participant, the mother of a 7-year old transgender girl, discussed the difficulty she faced in working with the school: "Although the director seemed supportive, she and the staff were completely uneducated. And there was no confidentiality. She just started telling everyone without offering any education to them." Another participant

reported that even though the school had a designated liaison to work with LGBT-identified children, she felt her 12-year old transgender daughter had received little support at school:

Our school board has an LGBT, I don't know, liaison or support, and even he...was really unhelpful. And he didn't get gender identity. Her experience was very relevant to the LGBT liaison program, but he really – he didn't provide really concrete support.

Furthermore, standard gender-biased practices may create new or additional challenges for parents of transgender children that do not exist for the parents of cisgender children. One participant, the mother of a 14-year old gender expansive child, discussed how the school's adherence to gender norms impacted her communication with them:

I did speak with the head of the school. We had a couple conversations, but this issue [her child's gender identity] didn't come up specifically. But you know what, the way things are, the standards, the norms; I don't even see how they can help at this point.

### **Experiences of Family Strain**

This third theme outlines the strain families with a transgender child experience due to their child's school's gender restrictive policies and practices. Participants in the sample, who reported facing challenges and barriers with their children's schools, discussed the variety of ways in which those issues impacted them as a family. One parent in the sample highlighted the depth of the challenges she and her 14-year old gender expansive daughter faced from the school, even though she felt that she and her partner were good at handling issues with the school:



Her first three years of schooling was really – I would describe as being traumatic. Both for her, and I would say for me as a parent. And from kindergarten and we – I mean, we're pretty assertive, confident parents, in terms of interfacing with the school, this was a large publically funded elementary school in our neighborhood and yet we faced a lot of challenges and barriers.

One mother recalled the lasting effect that bullying and harassment in the school had not only on her 12-year old gender expansive child, but on her, as well, after being forced to remove her child from school due to multiple unaddressed incidents of bullying and harassment. Of the experience, she stated:

[It] continues to be sort of etched in my mind and heart in terms of just what – seeing the constant, everyday fear that she [her child] experienced at such a young age from other children and not really feeling that the adults in that school were really providing the kind of safety that she needed.

Several parents also stated that they felt they had been pushed to make a choice to homeschool their child, regardless of their desire or even ability to do so. The mother of the 11-year old transgender girl whom the school refused to allow on campus outlined the complexity of her decision to homeschool her child:

[T]he ACLU ended up connecting with me for this. We went pretty far with it, but we couldn't have gone any further without involving [child's name] specifically, like she would have had to testify. She would have had to have a voice for the cause so to speak, and I wasn't going to pull her into it. It's not... she's just not an advocate. She's not an activist; she's just a kid. So, we ended up not going any further with it [and] I ended up keeping her at home and schooling her at home for

about three and a half years. I'm not a homeschool mom; I'm just not that mom.

So it wasn't a good fit. It was something that we just simply had to do.

Another mother discussed how her 14-year old transgender son requested to be homeschooled after experiencing multiple incidents of bullying and harassment by his peers: "He wanted to be homeschooled, and we're really not homeschool kind of people. I just didn't think that was the answer." Several parents also discussed their decision to remove their child from a particular school altogether, and either wait to re-enroll the child in a different school or remove them completely. The mother of a 7-year old transgender girl recounted her decision to remove her daughter entirely from preschool:

Her first preschool was a Montessori where she went as boy...during this time is when she started expressing that she was a girl. We did try a preschool after the Montessori when she very first transitioned and that didn't go very well. It wasn't necessary so we just withdrew her.

For several other parents in this sample, the decision to withdraw their child from one school and enroll them in another was made. The mother of a 12-year old gender expansive girl stated that "there're very few of these kinds of independent schools here – there was nothing near our home so we travel about 45 minutes to school."

## CHAPTER FIVE. DISCUSSION

Transgender youth and their families are part of a particularly stigmatized and frequently overlooked group of parents and children. Analyzing the experiences of parents of transgender children offers a more in-depth look into some of the struggles parents may face when supporting their children, especially in school settings. These analyses can also serve to highlight the many ways in which parents manage stigma, navigate the challenges and barriers their families face, and work through the impact of these challenges and barriers on their families (e.g., Kivalanka, et al., 2014; Johnson & Benson, 2014). Analyses of parents' interactions with their children's schools are particularly important because many schools have not yet adopted policies and practices that could help counter some of the stigma, challenges, and barriers faced by transgender children and their families (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Toomey, et al., 2012). Therefore, the primary goal of this project was to answer the question: what are the experiences of parents of transgender children as they interact with schools on behalf of their children?

Before the main findings are discussed, however, it is important to first consider the impact of gender on this study as a whole. Gender permeates nearly all facets of life and often encourages a particular belief or expectation for both the self and others (Dietert & Dentice, 2013). It also lends itself to the creation of impenetrable standards based on the belief that only two genders exist (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). These standards are particularly salient in schools (Toomey, et al., 2012); and the effects of these standards contribute greatly to the further stigmatization and marginalization of transgender children and their families. Due to this study's emphasis on the central role gender plays in parents' experiences with their transgender children's schools, it is important to discuss gender as it pertains not only to the children, but to the parents, as well.

## Participants' Gender

Although the call for participants for the larger study from which this data was gathered was open to anyone parenting a transgender child, nearly all participants were women in a mothering role. This was also reflected in a recent study by Rahilly (2015), who, in her recruitment of parents with transgender children for a longitudinal project, indicated that no fathers contacted her to participate in her study. The abundance of women participating in these studies is not surprising given that, in Western society, mothers are socially expected to be primarily responsible for child rearing. This trend was also evident in this study's sample, given that many of the participants reported that they were either single mothers or grandmothers in a mothering role. Further, women inherently navigate their own gender-biased systemic oppressions, which have socialized them in a particular way through the patriarchal systems within which they live, especially as they take on the responsibility of raising children (hooks, 2004). Due to their history of maneuvering oppressive systems, though, mothers may actually be in the best position to negotiate for their transgender and/or gender expansive child in regards to gender oppression based on their own lifelong experience in doing so (Jackson & Mannix, 2004). Additionally, a few participants also identified as lesbian, which may offer them a unique perspective not only on oppression and marginalization of women and sexual minorities, but also on the role of gender in parenting. Regardless of the potential reasons behind the involvement in schools by women in a mothering role, the number of women participating in this study highlights the impact of gender-biased social roles and standards on both individuals and families (Martin & Ruble, 2009), as well as how extensively those standards influence behavior.

For the current study, only two men were involved, and of the two, only one participated in an interview, which he and his wife completed together. The second man contacted the

researchers in order to set up an interview for his wife, but did not participate. The predominance of mothers participating and absence of fathers' participation in this study may be attributed to gender norms; for example, Brill and Pepper (2008) assert that a larger homophobic discourse that questions the masculinity of fathers' parenting non-heterosexual and/or gender expansive children. Homophobia can play a large role in how transgender children are received by their parents, particularly their fathers (Brill & Pepper, 2008); therefore, fathers may be less likely to be involved in studies such as these.

### **Main Findings**

The majority of experiences reported by parents in this study reflected the schools' responses to their children's transgender and gender expansive presentations; therefore, the main findings of the current study indicated that parents' experiences with schools depended largely upon the degree of inclusiveness of the school. For schools that were gender inclusive, or maintained inclusive policies, practices, and climates, parents expressed feeling less obligated to intervene on behalf of their children because they felt the school was properly handling issues that arose. In cases where the schools were gender evolving, or open and willing to change their gender-biased policies and practices, parents reported that their involvement with the schools seemed to have a larger impact on policy, practice, and climate transformation. For schools that were gender restrictive, or maintained restrictive policies, practices, and climates, however, parents expressed feeling a sense of responsibility to intervene in proactive ways to ensure their child's safety. This often included requesting teacher conferences, attending board meetings, and in more severe cases, withdrawing their children from the schools.

Initial analysis of the data in this study included themes and subthemes within each category; however, the findings and previous research associated with this study's established

themes and subthemes were found to be inextricably intertwined with one another. Therefore, the following discussion of the main findings of this study is organized by category in order to better emphasize and integrate this project's findings with existing literature. Additionally, this chapter will address the educational and clinical implications of this study, its limitations, and future research directions.

### **Parents' Experiences of Gender Inclusive Schools: "*They always got it.*"**

Findings from this study confirmed findings from previous research that emphasized parents' beliefs in it being the school's responsibility to provide a safe, welcoming, and supportive environment to all students, regardless of gender identity (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Kosciw, et al., 2015; Minter, 2012; Sausa, 2005; Slesaransky-Poe & García, 2009). In support of previous research, according to the parents in this study, the implementation of gender inclusive policies and practices was also fundamental in fostering a gender inclusive climate within their children's schools (e.g., Kosciw, et al., 2015; Russell, et al., 2010).

Many of the parents in this study expressed gratitude for the initiative their children's schools took in implementing inclusive policies, particularly because it encouraged teachers and other school personnel to intervene in the harassment and bullying of transgender children. These findings corresponded with findings from a study by Payne and Smith (2014) whose results reveal that teachers in schools with clear policies might be more likely to intervene in harassment and bullying, and in contrast, teachers might be less likely to intervene in schools without these policies. These findings support one another in establishing that the implementation of policies is vital in creating a safe educational environment for transgender children.

Parents in the current study also expressed gratitude for their children's schools in participating in professional development trainings in order to promote inclusive practices. By

implementing ally development models for students (Zammitt, et al., 2015), as well as providing comprehensive trainings for adults working with children (Slesaransky-Poe, 2013), schools can work to decrease incidences of harassment and bullying by peers and staff, alike. For example, Jacob (2013) outlines the significance of schools implementing inclusive policies and engaging employees in professional development training with a particular focus on issues facing LGBT youth, because schools that are actively involved in professional development trainings have been shown to assist in fostering a more positive educational environment for all children. Additionally, Toomey et al. (2012) discuss the importance of non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies, as well as the incorporation of more LGBT-based issues into school curricula, in creating a safer educational environment for students. Based on previous research, as well as the findings from the current study, schools are in a unique position to actively work toward creating an educational environment for teachers that allows teachers to better promote safety for LGBT students.

Parents in the current study expressed an appreciation for their children's schools' commitment to diversity, as well as the schools' holistic and collaborative approaches to supporting transgender children. These findings are supported by previous research that has recommended more collaboration between families and a variety of professions (e.g., mental health, legal, education) to work together to create a better future for transgender children (e.g., Minter, 2012).

Several parents in this study discussed feeling as though their children's teachers took the lead in supporting and creating an inclusive climate for their children in school. These findings are supported by previous research that has charged educators with an ethical responsibility to provide a safe and healthy learning environment to all children (Jacob, 2013). Additionally, a

previous study by Luecke (2011), concluded with a call to action to schools to “take the lead” (p. 152) regarding demonstrating support of transgender children, and according to the parents in the current study, many schools have already answered the call.

The parents in this study also discussed their satisfaction with schools in cases where their own expertise as the parents of transgender children was solicited and heeded. These findings are supported by a previous study by Slesaransky-Poe, et al., (2013), which emphasized the importance of parental collaboration with schools. Several mothers in this study discussed working closely with their children’s schools in order to provide guidance and feedback, but not to the point of feeling as though they were in the role of educator to the staff. As Luecke (2011) cautions, it is a “fine line to walk” (p. 153) in separating collaborative efforts from requests by schools that the parents of transgender children take the lead in educating staff. However, according to the parents in this study, their children’s gender inclusive schools have demonstrated an ability to walk that line.

**Parents’ Experiences of Gender Evolving Schools: *“They worked really hard.”***

Findings from this study indicated that schools were often willing and able to make changes to their restrictive policies and practices when prompted by the parents of transgender children. Parents in this study discussed the importance of their children attending schools that were not only committed to the education of children, but also to educating themselves in order to be more supportive of transgender students. Corresponding with these findings, previous research has outlined more gender inclusive practices for schools to engage in, such as participating in professional development trainings (Jacob, 2013), and working collaboratively with parents (Johnson, et al., 2014; Luecke, 2011), as well as actively engaging in challenging



gender norms with children, avoiding forced participation in gender segregated activities, and addressing and intervening in harassment and bullying immediately (Sausa, 2005).

Additionally, as schools may not enforce protective policies until a transgender child enrolls or transitions from one perceived gender to another while enrolled in the school, schools may require prompting from parents to consider how to evolve their gender restrictive policies and practices (Kovalanka, et al., 2014; Luecke, 2011; Payne & Smith, 2014). However, according to parents' experiences from the current study, it seems that for some school personnel, such as teachers, once the door has been opened for considering the impact of restrictive policies and practices, reflection and change toward more inclusive practices can occur.

Findings from this study support findings from previous research in which schools were called on to reflect on their own gender-biased policies and practices (Sausa, 2005). The parents in the current study discussed their satisfaction with schools that were willing to consider the practicality and impact of their gender restrictive policies. Parents also noted how their transgender children's school's reflections on restrictive practices (i.e., having children line up by gender, participation in gender-segregated activities), seemed to help them better understand how those practices might serve to alienate transgender children from their peers (Boskey, 2014; Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Johnson, et al., 2014; Sausa, 2005; Toomey, et al., 2012). According to the parents in this study, these reflections seemed to lead to changes both inside and out of the classrooms, such as having children pick their own partners for lining up and offering co-ed activities, as well as creating more inclusive policies surrounding restroom use for students.

For schools, participation in gender restrictive practices highlights larger heteronormative assumptions about gender (e.g., Oswald, et al., 2005; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009), and how those

assumptions permeate thinking and persist in society (e.g., Toomey, et al., 2012). Addressing these assumptions is difficult, but necessary, according to previous research, which has focused on working toward more inclusive and accepting views of transgender identities (Boskey, 2014; Lev, 2004, 2006; Riggle, et al., 2011; Toomey, et al., 2012). Several parents in this study also encouraged teachers to ask them questions and engage in conversations about their transgender children in order to help facilitate the schools' larger evolution toward a more inclusive environment. Encouraging questions is an important part of creating a dialogue (Malpas, 2011), which allows parents and schools to collaborate and work toward evolving a more gender inclusive environment.

A queer-feminist approach would take this dialogue one step further by questioning the existence of policies and practices, as well as determining not only their origin, but also their evolution. Additionally, a queer-feminist look into restrictive policies and practices would call for a shift from viewing transgender children as the problem to viewing the larger social systems that perpetuate heteronormative assumptions and biases as the problem (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Oswald, et al., 2005; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Toomey, et al., 2012). For the parents in the current study, whose children attended evolving schools, it was the schools' attempts to recognize and dismantle their own gender-biased assumptions that most often encouraged change. These findings correspond with Brill and Pepper's (2008) recommendation for parents to work not to attempt to change children by forcing them to conform, but to change the systems that force conformity and instead allow children to flourish.

## **Parents' Experiences of Gender Restrictive Schools:**

*"[The school] will only go as far as the law."*

Results from the current study indicated that parents were more involved in schools that had a more restrictive view of gender reflected in their policies and practices. Parents discussed the challenges and barriers they faced with their children's schools, such as concerns regarding physical and mental health and safety, as well as their children's exclusion from educational and social opportunities. Similar to previous research findings, parents in the current study noted an increase of symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and aggression in their children when they reported being harassed, bullied, or excluded by peers and/or staff at school (e.g., Minter, 2012; Osterman, 2000; Ryan, et al., 2010). Overall, these increases in symptoms seemed to be largely due to the school's inherent support of discriminatory policies and practices, as well as their dismissal of reports of bullying and harassment. Transgender children challenge the social norms of acceptable gendered behavior, and are often discouraged from expressing their gender in a way that is consistent with their gender identity (Dietert & Dentice, 2013), as it often causes discomfort or confusion for others. However, while forced conformity to gender-biased standards of expression may limit discomfort or confusion, it also serves to limit diversity to which other students are exposed.

Due to their children's reports of harassment, bullying, and exclusion from educational and social opportunities, parents in the current study expressed feeling a sense of responsibility to intervene in discriminatory policies and practices. Parents also discussed a variety of ways they intervened at their children's schools in order to ensure their child's safety and education: by requesting teacher conferences, attending board meetings, providing the schools with inclusive materials, and in more severe cases, withdrawing their children from the schools when

the schools remained restrictive. These findings are supported by previous studies that have called for parental intervention in discriminatory school policies and practices (Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Jacob, 2013; Kosciw, et al., 2015) as a way to demonstrate support for transgender children and effect policy and practice changes within the schools.

Findings from this study demonstrate the impact of discriminatory policies and practices on transgender children and their families. While common policies and practices may not be overtly discriminatory, the absence of non-discrimination and/or anti-bullying policies within schools can create an environment that is more hostile and even dangerous for transgender students (Greytak, et al., 2009; Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006; Mahdi, et al., 2014). Additionally, the heteronormative discourse that treats transgender children as problematic simply based on their nonconformity to common gender-biased standards of expression and behavior, creates more space in schools for the pathologization and further marginalization of transgender students (Minter, 2012). Further, pathologization and marginalization serve to privilege specific areas of transgender children's school experiences over others, such as emphasizing their restroom usage and others' discomfort with their gender over their right to an education (Minter, 2012). As several parents in the current study discussed, this strict adherence to policies and practices creates more problems for transgender children in schools (Minter, 2012).

One example from the current study, in which the school principal refused to allow a child to enroll in school, or even set foot on school grounds, due to her gender expansive presentation, highlights the potential harm of gender restrictive policies and practices. As this mother's experience demonstrates, when schools strictly adhere to their restrictive policies, common gender-biased practices can border on illegal. However, for school personnel who wish to intervene when witnessing acts of harassment and bullying, an absence of non-discrimination

and anti-bullying policies limits their ability to intervene without fear of losing their jobs (Payne & Smith, 2014). Since previous research has demonstrated that students are more likely to intervene in harassment and bullying of their peers if they have seen an adult, such as a teacher, do so (Wernick, et al., 2014), these policies also limit peers from intervening, further contributing to the exclusion of their transgender peers.

Even in situations where schools have clear non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies, implementation becomes a key issue (Jacob, 2013). With a lack of clear non-discrimination and anti-bullying policies, school personnel are often left to interpret and implement their own practices based on how they understand the policies (Payne & Smith, 2014). However, if teachers and other school personnel are left to interpret the policies on their own, it renders policies ineffective, and essentially useless, in protecting transgender children from discrimination and bullying, thereby creating a more discriminatory educational climate throughout the school.

An article by Tishelman, et al. (2015) highlights the varying degrees of comfort schools may have when working with transgender children and their families. Parents in the current study seemed understanding of this as they were able to give their children's schools some leeway in adapting their policies and practices because they realized that navigating and accepting a social transition is a learning process for everyone. However, due to the existence of widely accepted heteronormative assumptions and biases in schools (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Oswald, et al., 2005; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Toomey, et al., 2012), acceptance of gender expansive children often seems to take more time than it should. Since heteronormative assumptions and biases come from hierarchical social beliefs that systemically privilege heterosexual and cisgender individuals and behaviors (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Oswald, et al.,

2005; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Toomey, et al., 2012), transgender children and their families are often continuously marginalized as they work toward gaining acceptance from their schools. For some parents in the current study, both parents and children feel marginalized and oppressed in such a way that leads parents to choose to remove their children from the schools, begin homeschooling, and isolate themselves from the school and community in order to protect their children.

The focus of studies regarding the experiences of transgender children and their families is often fixated on the children themselves and their challenge of heteronormative social standards, as opposed to the ways in which they are particularly affected by heteronormative discourses (Lev, 2004, 2006; Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006). However, experiences of marginalization and oppression within schools, which often stem from the school's adherence to gender restrictive policies and practices (e.g., Toomey, et al., 2012), are likely to negatively affect and place additional strain on other relationships (Norwood, 2012); such as those with extended family, friends, and other community members, as well as employment and access to resources. Additionally, adherence to restrictive policies and practices places parents into a position of having to make life decisions about whether or not to pursue litigation, homeschool, move their children to another district, or even move out of state, all to give one child a chance to thrive.

Although the parents in the current study, who discussed having had to make such decisions, stated that they ended up being the best decisions they could have made, if schools were doing what they are charged with doing (i.e., providing a safe environment in which children are able to pursue their education, Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Sausa, 2005), parents would not be charged with the sole responsibility in making these decisions. Parents in the current study

discussed the difficulties of having to make decisions regarding how far they would go in order to advocate for their children, as well, because persistence, which sometimes involves continuously challenging the schools' policies and even pursuing litigation, might be more harmful than helpful to their children. Furthermore, parents are only capable of doing so much on their own if the school is unwilling to evolve its policies and practices to be more inclusive. However, as the current social climate is not favorable for inclusive schools, and as larger institutional systems of marginalization and oppression continue to be guided by heteronormative assumptions and biases (e.g., Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Toomey, et al., 2012), parents often must turn to others for support (e.g., Brill & Pepper, 2008; Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Kuvalanka, et al., 2014), especially in navigating the schools with their transgender children.

Providing support is imperative for helping professionals who work with the families of transgender children, especially for families who do not receive support elsewhere. Family therapists are in a particularly unique position to be able to work well with transgender children and their families and also with the children's schools (Potoczniak, Crosbie-Burnett, & Saltzburg, 2009), based on their ability to work with systems (Grafsky, 2014; Johnson & Benson, 2014; Wahlig, 2014). Family therapists are trained in a way that emphasizes how systems operate, whether they are smaller family systems or larger social systems, in a way that may be more advantageous to effecting change toward a more gender inclusive environment. Findings from the current study support results from a study by Potoczniak et al. (2009), which indicates that, due to their background and training regarding systems, schools would do well to hire family therapists to provide much needed support to transgender children and their families.

## **Educational Implications**

The current study offers a unique look into the experiences of transgender children in schools through the experiences of their parents. Although parents are primarily responsible for raising their children (Ryan, 2009; Weinstein, et al., 2012), schools are vital in their contribution to the development of children. The current study offers a unique opportunity for schools to increase awareness of the needs of transgender children through the experiences parents have had with their children's schools. This awareness can then serve to foster more effective and inclusive policies and practices within schools.

The National Education Association's *Code of Ethics of the Education Profession* establishes that inclusive policies are not simply about providing accommodations for a single child, but are instead about the schools upholding their ethical responsibilities to their students and communities (as cited in Jacob, 2013). Due to this ethical responsibility, schools must be knowledgeable about topics relevant to transgender children and their families, and must be proactive in implementing gender inclusive policies and practices. Parents of transgender children in particular are encouraged to communicate not only with their children, but also with the schools directly in order to gauge how inclusive the school is, and whether or not intervention is necessary (Malpas, 2011). The results of this study demonstrate that the more gender inclusive a school is, the less parents feel obligated to intervene in order to effect change. For schools that are more gender evolving or restrictive, the current study offers insight into the ways in which these discriminatory policies and practices negatively affect transgender children and their families, and can hopefully encourage a change in the system.



## **Clinical Implications**

Results from the current study contribute to findings from previous research, which has demonstrated a need for additional support for transgender children and their families (e.g., Hill & Menvielle, 2009; Hill, Menvielle, Sica, & Johnson, 2010; Johnson & Benson, 2014; Johnson, et al., 2014; Luecke, 2011). It is imperative, however, that this support is affirmative in that it is not pathologizing of the child or the family, and that it allows for a more systemic view of the issues that arise. For parents whose children attend schools that are more restrictive, or are evolving and require additional engagement while working to create changes, therapists and other helping professionals can offer assistance only if they are knowledgeable and competent in related issues.

The current study provides an opportunity for helping professionals to educate themselves on the challenges and barriers, as well as the positive experiences, that parents have raising transgender children. In cases where parents are unfamiliar with the larger needs of their transgender child, or are unsure of what to ask for from the schools, or how to ask for it, a therapist who is knowledgeable about such issues will be beneficial for support and advocacy. However, it is important to understand that parents who are not accepting of their transgender children will be less likely to seek affirmative help (Malpas, 2011); therefore it is important that helping professionals, particularly those working within schools, reach out and create awareness on their own.

Furthermore, family therapists, more specifically, are in a position to be more able to consider the larger family systems and dynamics (e.g., Grafsky, 2014; Wahlig, 2014), as well as the larger implications of operating within institutional systems, such as schools (e.g., Bethea & McCollum, 2013; Potoczniak, et al., 2009). This gives family therapists a window into how best

to intervene and implement systemic change that can benefit all children, as opposed to working to accommodate only a few children.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study is the lack of diversity of the sample, which included mostly White, heterosexual, married, women in a mothering role. It is also important to note that the sample utilized for this study was originally recruited through various LGBT advocacy organizations, as well as by word-of-mouth from other participants. Many LGBT advocacy organizations tend to include mostly White, middle-to-upper class families, which could account for the lack of racial and economic diversity in the sample; therefore, recruitment through other social justice organizations, such as those aimed specifically toward racial and socioeconomic justice, could increase diversity. Participants' self-selection biases may have impacted this study in that parents who are willing to participate in research may feel as though they have something considerable to contribute.

### **Future Research**

The majority of the existing literature regarding the experiences of parents of transgender children is conveyed from the perspective of the children (e.g., Grossman, et al., 2005; Grossman, et al., 2006; Riley, et al., 2013); therefore future research could continue to expand upon the existing literature to be more inclusive of parents' own perspectives of their experiences. Additionally, being intentional about recruiting a more diverse and culturally representative sample, as well as a sample that includes more individuals in a fathering role, may create an opportunity for comparison across cultures and gender. Focusing on the intersectionality of the social locations of race, class, and gender would be of particular interest considering the independent and conjunctive impact that each social location has on a person and

their family, as well (Harris & Bartlow, 2015; Singh, 2013). For example, according to recent national news reports transgender women of color are at the highest risk for experiencing violence in their communities (Steinmetz, 2015); demonstrating the compounding impact that the intersections of race and gender, and likely class, as well, have on one another (Harris & Bartlow, 2015; Singh, 2013).

Future research opportunities may also include focusing more on the extent to which parents are involved in policy and practice changes within their transgender children's schools in order to gain a better understanding of their role. As the results of this study indicated that parents' experiences with their children's schools depended largely upon the degree of inclusiveness of the schools, future research could also focus on more specific details about how or why parents of transgender children report better experiences with more inclusive schools. Additionally, expanding upon the questions from the initial questionnaire to include more inquiries directly addressing the participants' experiences with their children's schools might offer additional, more in-depth, results by allowing for more specific details on the experiences to be gathered.

### **Conclusion**

The findings in this study provide valuable insight into the experiences of parents of transgender children as they interact with schools on behalf of their children. This study is especially valuable, as no studies to date have exclusively considered the experiences of parents, from their own perspectives, as they interact with their children's schools. Findings from this study confirmed results from previous research that emphasized parents' beliefs in it being the school's responsibility to provide a safe, welcoming, and supportive environment to all students, regardless of gender identity (Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Kosciw, et al., 2015; Minter, 2012;

Sausa, 2005; Slesaransky-Poe & García, 2009), in order to foster a gender inclusive educational climate (Kosciw, et al., 2015; Russell, et al., 2010). Findings from this study also provided evidence of a response to previous researchers' calls to action for schools to become more gender inclusive (Jacob, 2013; Luecke, 2011; Sausa, 2005). As such, this study is unique in its contribution not only to family therapy, but also to education, based on its reflection of how a school's degree of inclusiveness impacts the experiences parents of transgender children have with their children's schools. Therefore, the findings from this study are vital in promoting awareness and advocacy within the fields of family therapy and education in their various supporting roles with transgender students and their families.

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## APPENDIX. INTERVIEW GUIDE

### Parenting Children who are Gender Nonconforming Interview Guide

#### Parenting

I understand that you are parenting a child who does not conform to gender norms/expectations (act how someone might expect a boy/girl to act). Can you paint me a picture of what it is like for you?

Can you tell me how you felt when you realized your child did not express their gender as one might expect?

What has helped you to be successful negotiating your role as a parent?

If you met another parent who had recently discovered that their child didn't conform to gender expectations, what would you say to them?

Do you have general thoughts about how parents should support their child who doesn't conform to gender expectations?

What messages have you received from others about your parenting?

#### Family & Friends

Can you tell me a little bit about what that has been like for you and your family?

Are there any specific events that stand out in your mind?

Have you had any experiences with extended family related to [child name] that you are willing to tell me about? With friends?

#### Probing questions:

What experiences have you had with friends or family that surprised you?

What has it been like with [child name] friends?

#### Support

Who in your life has been most supportive? How have they shown support?

Please describe the resources are you connected to. (i.e., Support groups)

#### Probing questions:

How did you locate them?

#### School

How have you handled [child name] gender expression at [child name] school?

#### Probing questions:

What has that been like?

### Mental Health Services

What are your beliefs about mental health services like a therapy, counseling, psychology, or psychiatry?

Do you think any of these services are or could be helpful to families like yours?

How would you go about finding a mental health/helping professional (therapist/counselor)?

How knowledgeable do you think a helping professional should be about gender identity?

#### Probing questions:

How would you know that a therapist/counselor is?

Has anyone in your family been to see a mental health professional like a therapist, counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist?

Can you tell me about this experience?

#### Probing questions:

What did the therapists do that was helpful?

What did the therapists do that was not helpful?

If you or your family haven't spoken with a mental health professional, what has kept you from going?

### Family Therapy

What advice do you have for family therapists who want to help and support families like yours?

#### Probing questions:

What do you think family therapists need to know to help families like yours?

### Concluding Interview

Is there a metaphor that captures your experience parenting a child like [child name]?

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