

# Public School Teacher Support of Transgender Students

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PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER SUPPORT OF TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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in the College of Sciences  
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at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

Using qualitative interviews, this study explored public school support of transgender students using questions concerning their knowledge, ideas of what inclusion looks like, level of preparation for teaching transgender students, and openness to learning new information concerning best practices. This study aims to fill gaps in the existing research concerning experiences of transgender public school students, examining teacher support for the sake of helping determine policy steps and education that would best help transgender students looking for inclusive education. Emerging themes included generalized acceptance, fear of teaching outside curriculum, emphasis placed on student needs, and teachers' desires to learn more. These results are explored with consideration to their implications for policy, training, and resource compilation.

### *Key Terms*

*LGBTQ+*—Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and those who consider themselves part of this community but do not identify with terms contained within the acronym.

*Transgender*—an adjective used to describe an individual who identifies with a gender different from what they are assigned at birth.

*Cisgender*—an adjective used to describe an individual who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth.

NOTE: Vocabulary within the LGBTQ+ community changes rapidly, and these terms may become considered outdated following the conclusion of this study.

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## PUBLIC SCHOOL TEACHER SUPPORT OF TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

### *Background*

At the time of this writing, transgender issues are a prominent and frequently discussed topic. Transgender celebrities have come to the forefront of the public eye and have come under much scrutiny by the public, while an increasing number of adults are publicly self-identifying as transgender (Flores 2016). Transgender youth have also become the subject of public debate. Scholarly works addressing or discussing the social construction and psychological phenomena of gender identity in children have been especially numerous in the past decade, and many adults feel challenged by what they perceive as novel and perhaps unorthodox ideas regarding the gender binary (Payne and Smith 2014). The current presidential administration has made public several decisions many consider discriminatory to transgender individuals, including a proposal to ban transgender people from serving in the military (Philipps 2018), efforts to “define transgender out of existence” (Green, Benner, and Pear 2018), and approving employer discrimination based on gender identity (Opfer 2018). In such a hostile environment, it is often unclear to public school teachers how they should handle the presence of a transgender student in their classroom.

Whether transgender students are protected under the law has often been debated at the federal and local levels. In 2016, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education released a joint statement offering guidance to public school teachers and administrations on how to ensure the civil rights of transgender students (US Department of Justice 2016), corroborating a Department of Education memo from two years prior that stated the protections offered under Title IX extended to transgender students (US Department of Education 2014). Almost immediately following a change of administration, these guidelines were rescinded completely with no

replacement (US Department of Justice 2017). At the center of these decisions are policies forcing transgender students to use restrooms that do not align with their gender identities. These policies have been the subject of several court cases that aim to expose such policies as unconstitutional, including the currently ongoing case of Gavin Grimm (Balingit 2016; Williams 2017; Stevens 2018). The deeply politicized nature of transgender students' existence, as well as public discourse that often portrays transgender individuals in a negative way, or even denies that they exist, can discourage educators from being prepared to teach transgender students in a safe and inclusive way.

As awareness of the transgender population becomes more widespread, an especially important place to look for progress or regression is in U.S. public schools. School districts and their policies often reflect both local and more widespread values and norms. Due to this, examining teachers' knowledge of how to support transgender students facilitates gauging general attitudes toward transgender individuals. This study measured the readiness of fourteen (14) U.S. public school teachers to support potential, current, and past transgender students, as well as their preparedness to effectively include these students in their classrooms, in order to create a reflection of the modern educational climate for these students and contribute new findings to the pre-existing literature.

### *Contributions*

Much of the existing literature discussing LGBTQ+ youth in U.S. public schools focuses largely on lesbian, gay, bisexual and otherwise minority sexuality youth, and has little to offer regarding inclusive practices and awareness of transgender students. "Gay" is often used colloquially as an umbrella term implied to encompass all LGBTQ+ individuals, allowing transgender issues to become further marginalized even within research concerned with gender and sexuality

minorities. Additionally, research regarding public school LGBTQ+ students usually focuses on the students' experience. While vitally important, this research does not reflect public school teachers' self-awareness regarding their own support, or lack thereof, for their LGBTQ+ students. Most of the research that does exist measuring teacher support has been conducted outside of the United States and skews toward the quantitative, leaving gaps in the way of qualitative research in the U.S. concerning teacher support of these students. This study contributes research to gaps in the existing literature by offering qualitative research detailing reflections of teachers in the U.S. on their own perception and support of transgender students in their schools.



## REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

### *LGBTQ+ Individuals in Public Schools*

Among communities of public educators, it is a commonly shared view that teachers have a responsibility to create a safe environment for students in their classroom. This stems from a moral obligation pervasively felt throughout these communities (Sadowski 2016a), codified in educational philosophy's use of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McElroy 2013) and legal standards that mark specific guidelines for protecting all students (Education Amendments of 1972). Unfortunately, viewpoints regarding this responsibility often become muddled and debated when discussing LGBTQ+ students, especially those who identify as transgender.

Some teachers may view generalized nondiscrimination laws as sufficient for protecting their LGBTQ+ students (Sadowski 2016b), possibly under concern that further action on the behalf of such a student may be seen by their other students or administration as favoritism or "special treatment." As such, many teachers do not see the need, or do not take the time to educate themselves about measures necessary to ensure the safety of their LGBTQ+ students. Scholars have also acknowledged that safety, though critical for these students, is "not a sufficient goal in itself" (Sadowski 2016b:13) and should be treated as a stepping-stone, rather than an end goal, for ensuring that LGBTQ+ students have access to an optimal learning environment.

Teachers may disagree about how active their role should be in addressing the existence of an unsafe school climate and ensuring the existence of safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students. Scholars suggest, however, that "teachers and administrators ought to care about students in ways that go beyond what laws, policies, and professional codes require" (Mayo 2014:7).

One significant obstacle preventing teachers from giving appropriate care and guidance to their LGBTQ+ students is a lack of awareness regarding how to do so. Though several resources exist, it may be unclear for someone with no prior known contact with a member of the LGBTQ+ community to know where to look for such resources. Due to the amount of power and authority teachers hold in student-teacher interactions, it is not appropriate for a teacher to demand emotional labor from a student by asking the student to explain, and possibly justify, their own identity. Teachers then are left to ask their own communities for advice on including LGBTQ+ students and run the risk of receiving answers that promote bigotry or are well intentioned but will ultimately do more harm than good (Palkki 2016). Teachers who understand appropriate practices for safely including LGBTQ+ students are then forced to assume a new role as an educator of their colleagues to ensure student safety, or to appeal to administration to have an advocate act as this educator. Such necessities are easily avoidable the more teachers understand these practices and the more effectively they can act in their role as mentor and protector for all of their students.

The importance of safe and inclusive practices in teaching LGBTQ+ students becomes clearly vital when taking into consideration the experiences of these students in school environments. The 2017 School Climate Survey by GLSEN reflects that 28.9% of LGBTQ+ students surveyed were physically harassed because of their identity, and 12.4% were physically assaulted (Kosciw et al. 2018). The survey also demonstrates how experiencing this violence can have an adverse effect on these students' education, as survey responders also report not participating in extracurricular activities, avoiding all gendered spaces, and even not going to school as a result of experiencing an unsafe climate (Kosciw et al. 2016).

Unfortunately, the lives of LGBTQ+ students, especially transgender students, are often politicized, and appropriate care for these students can become unclear to teachers who aim to avoid taking political stances in the classroom. District policies can encourage this sense of perceived neutrality, but such positions do not actually encourage neutrality and safety for students; rather, schools were “not neutral; indeed... became more hostile toward their children” (Mayo 2014:60) due to the anti-LGBTQ+ bullying in which teachers would not intervene for the sake of preserving this apparent political neutrality (Mayo 2014).

#### *Appropriate Care for Transgender Students*

At the time of this study, many school districts have come to implement standards for teacher interactions specifically regarding transgender students. Some of these standards clarify how to handle the often-politicized issues pervasive in transgender students’ lives and aim to make trans students feel safe in their school district.

These policies have been met with little or some backlash from local communities, in one part due to the location in which they have been adopted, but mostly due to districts framing their policies as existing on behalf of ensuring safety and access to a conducive learning environment for all students and encouraging diversity. Still, even with these standards existing, teachers may often perceive that transgender and cisgender students should be treated with exact equality, and not acknowledge that the transgender community, like any community, has its own history and culture that can be acknowledged in their classroom or worked into their curriculums. These teachers may be prepared to make transgender students feel safe, but not necessarily included, which remains a vital aspect of positive experience for students of the public school system.

#### *Summary*

Public school teachers generally agree that their students need to be kept safe in their classrooms. However, when it comes to LGBTQ+ students, especially transgender students, the politicized lives of these students can cause teachers to feel uncomfortable in providing apt support (Mayo 2014). Thus, many teachers are inadequately prepared to handle the presence of potential trans students in their classroom in a manner that allows these students to feel like their public education is matching the quality of their cisgender peers (Vaccaro, August, and Kennedy 2012).

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### *Symbolic Interactionism*

Symbolic interactionism is rooted in the idea that the self is a product of social interaction (Carter, O’Connell, and Bubriski-McKenzie 2012). Symbolic interactionism “is based on three main premises: (1) individual action is based on the meanings people have for things, (2) these meanings are derived from social interactions with others, and (3) each individual uses a process of interpretation to assign meanings to things and events” (Carter et al. 2012:68).

*Symbolic interactionism and gender identity.* Symbolic interactionism serves as an appropriate framework for investigation involving the LGBTQ+ community, as much of the way people perceive others and themselves regarding sexuality and gender originates in meanings that individuals have assigned to these concepts, and these meanings come to be and change through social interactions as a person advances in life.

This is especially true regarding gender, which is suggested under symbolic interactionism to be a performative act (West and Zimmerman 1987). Gender displays, or “non-verbal forms of behavior” (Holmes 2009:50) often play a role in “social scripts about being feminine or masculine” (Holmes 2009:50). Therefore, a student exhibiting a certain gender display, whether for reasons of personal choice or for the sake of “passing” (Spradlin 1998) may be incorrectly read by a teacher possessing different experiences associated with masculinities or femininities.

*Symbolic interactionism and education.* In a position where they oversee a multitude of students across different backgrounds and cultures, teachers are interpreters of several social meanings and have the responsibility of both assigning meanings from their own perspective and cultivating the meanings that students will assign to interactions (Kinney, Rosier, and Hager

2003). Additionally, teachers are often assigned a role that has a sense of power and control to it. This means that decisions made by teachers will likely be emulated and considered a source of authority by students—a phenomenon that can have an adverse effect on the lives of transgender students should they encounter teachers who are ill-prepared to include them or not accepting of transgender identity.

### *Social Identity Theory*

Social identity theory discusses ideas of ‘in groups’ and ‘out groups,’ respectively groups that a person sees themselves as belonging to or not belonging to (Hogg and Abrams 2003). Research has shown that people tend toward acting in the interest of their ‘in group,’ regardless of whether this interest comes at the expense of their ‘out group’ (Hogg and Abrams 2003). They may also show favoritism and bias toward members of their ‘in group’ (Hogg and Abrams 2003).

In education, this can mean that certain individuals do not receive as effective of an education because they are not a part of the same ‘in group’ as their teacher. A teacher who is part of a social majority may have unconscious or conscious bias against those from a social minority, affecting their ability to educate students from this minority. Teachers who are cisgender, then, may possess a bias against transgender students due to these students belonging to an ‘out group.’ Whether or not the bias exists, the difference in social group membership means that there will be a detriment to the education of transgender students.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Subject Selection*

Participants for this study were selected among volunteer public school educators, ranging from elementary to secondary school level. These educators were sent a formal request of their participation via e-mail. Using snowball sampling, volunteers were first sought among the researcher's immediate contacts, after which the researcher requested recommendations for further interview subjects from participants. From here, participants were chosen using purposive sampling, where the characteristics of the population are used to determine the best participants to select. The researcher chose participants ensuring that a diverse set of characteristics were represented by the study population, such that a bias toward a particular characteristic in the study's population can be avoided. Participants were sought from both local and long-distance contacts, the latter communicating through phone or video chat interviews. All participants' identities were kept confidential.

Ultimately, fourteen (14) public school teachers were interviewed across a variety of locales, subjects, and amount of experience. Participants were demographically balanced in terms of gender (8 participants identified as men while 6 identified as women), teaching experience (8 had been teaching for over 10 years, while 6 had been teaching for less than 10) and their own membership in the LGBTQ+ community (6 participants identified themselves as LGBTQ+, while 8 others did not). The overall racial makeup of participants is unknown. Most teachers interviewed held a bias toward progressive political ideology, which can be attributed to the voluntary nature of the study—teachers with a conservative bias may be less likely to speak about minority issues for fear of being accused of bigotry.

### *Data Collection*

All participants were given informed consent forms and permitted to view interview questions (outlined in Appendix A) prior to interviews taking place. Interviews were conducted in a neutral environment agreed upon by the researcher and individual interview subject, appropriate to ethical guidelines. Participants outside of a 50-mile radius from the researcher were interviewed over a secure video or voice communication medium. Interview lengths ranged from 18 to 60 minutes and averaged around 30 minutes. Conducted interviews were made qualitative as a way to allow for co-construction, where the experience of both interviewer and participant as well as the relationship between the two assisted in obtaining comprehensive information (Charmaz 2014) from the teachers interviewed.

Participants were informed that confidentiality was a priority and made aware that they could choose to withdraw their answers from consideration in the analysis of results. All interviews were recorded using a portable mp3 recorder, uploaded to a password-protected computer, and transcribed. The resulting data were analyzed, coding for categories and patterns, and allowing concepts and theories emerge and evolve organically, as grounded theory allows “novel aspects of present experience [to] give rise to new interpretations and actions” (Charmaz 2014:265).

In order to code results, I recorded themes that developed both as I was conducting and as I was transcribing interviews. These themes were then used as a basis of what concepts to look for in reading through my interview transcripts and were delineated with edits to the text that allowed certain quotes that most effectively communicated these themes stand out. In choosing which quotes to include for analysis, I considered balance of both perspectives and participants, as well as how well the quotes managed to contribute to emerging themes.



### *Scope*

While this study offers a window into teacher support of transgender students, it does not reflect a comprehensive picture of the feelings of all public school teachers in the U.S. Participants skewed toward progressive ideologies, and it is possible teachers with negative views of transgender students refused to participate or reworked their opinions to appear more socially acceptable when giving answers.

As both researcher and interviewer, my own transgender identity may have also affected answers to study questions. I believe, however, that the positive effects of being transgender myself outweighed the potential negative effects, as my awareness and involvement in the trans community assisted my ability to appropriately prompt participants for further elaboration and interpret attained data in the most effective way for both teachers and transgender students. Many participants also asked questions of my own experience as a student, attesting that my openness and honesty encouraged them to feel more comfortable answering the interview questions. This experience of constructing interviews fits into the ideas of standpoint theory, which states that the lived experiences of marginalized groups contributes to a more comprehensive view of the world, referred to as “strong objectivity” (Harding 1991).

Though I am a member of the trans community, I am only one individual and cannot speak for the entire community nor represent the interests of an intersectional group, such as trans people of color or trans people with disabilities, as well as a researcher from one such community may be able to. My interpretation of results will be partially based on my own experience, but mostly will be analyzed in the context of the past research that has suggested the best courses of action in supporting LGBTQ+ youth.

## RESULTS

Teachers who agreed to participate in the study demonstrated a collective desire to be able to support transgender students in their classroom, with many clarifying that they were unsure of what practices would best accomplish this. The trends of the overall findings have been separated into four sections focusing on different aspects of the teaching career. The first, *Generalized Acceptance*, details how teachers see themselves as supporting trans students when they create safe, respectful classrooms—an effort that is helpful, but not enough on its own (Sadowski 2016b). The second section, *Pushback from Parents and Administration*, discusses the level of action that teachers are willing to take when making efforts to help a transgender student thrive in a family or school environment that may be more hostile to their identity. *Looking to Students for Direction* shows that teachers often rely on individual conversations with students and families for guidance when otherwise uncertain of how to handle a situation. Finally, *The Search for Resources* demonstrates that teachers are aware of the knowledge they lack when it comes to teaching practices for transgender students but are uncertain of where to find resources and desire more professional development in the area of teaching LGBTQ+ students.

### *“My Classroom is Not About Hate”*: Generalized Acceptance

A common idea expressed between all participants in the interviews was that of generalized acceptance, unconditional respect and acceptance of all students in their classrooms. In response to questions I asked about their process for making sure transgender students were included in their classroom, several teachers responded by making it clear that in their teaching, they made efforts to dispel and not to promote any sort of discrimination or bigotry:

We only have two rules in our class. Number one is 'be kind,' and the other one is 'do what you know is right.'

We all treat each other with respect in my class. ...we practice being nice to each other and engaging with each other.

We're taught as teachers we have to have a safe environment for our students. So whether a kid is blue, green, purple, gay, straight, transgender, whatever...I have to have a safe environment for that student.

My classroom is not about hate. ...We talk a lot about community and differences and that we're all...equally wonderful and as different as we can be.

We are welcoming and accepting to every single human being who walks in this room. They are a part of the family and we are going to love them...so they [understand] that when they walk in they're loved for whoever they are.

My job as a teacher is to accept every single student for who they identify themselves as and who they are and to love them...and if there's a student in my classroom who identifies as trans, then I accept them.

I would not necessarily treat a trans student differently than any other student in my classroom...meaning that I try to always foster a good community kind of feel in my

classroom...where everyone's opinion and everyone's lifestyle is to be tolerated even if you don't accept it. You still have to be kind to them...everyone has to feel they're safe to express how they feel without repercussion or without being made fun of, without being bullied, without being put down.

Some teachers were more specific in these ideals than others. A trend appeared among teachers themselves in the LGBTQ+ community, where these teachers were more likely than the other participants to enumerate support for students who identified as LGBTQ+. This is likely due to these teachers possessing a more personal understanding of what public school is like for a student not conforming to cisgender or heterosexual norms, as elaborated on by some participants:

When we do the anti-bullying stuff, I...talk a little bit about my coming out story. ...I bring that up, and I will tell the kids how lucky I was and while I wish everybody had [protection of their identity], I know that they don't, and so our job is all protecting....each other, and that's kind of the direction that we're going.

Being a member of the LGBT community myself, I would encourage [students exploring gender identity] to come speak to me...as much as they would like to. ...and there are several other members of the LGBT community in our staff as well that I might point them towards.

I certainly sympathize and empathize with...transgender youth. I...know how difficult it was for me to come out as a gay man. I can only imagine...how much harder it must be for someone to have to...come out as transgender.

Being trans myself I think that kind of gives me an advantage to understanding a bit more, because I can relate and know what [a transgender student is] going through.

Few teachers, however, described specific efforts to make their support for trans students in their classroom clear. Participants either assumed that support for trans students was clear from their generalized acceptance, or communicated to me that they felt it would be inappropriate to bring up their support of transgender students without a prompt from a specific instance:

I think if a child were to ask a question about [being] lesbian or being gay...I think if any of that was brought up, I would feel the need [to talk about it] but I don't think I want to bring it up as an issue or a topic. ...I think that needs to come from their own questioning curiosity.

This was directly contrasted by certain other participants, who encouraged discussion of transgender identity in an educational environment:

I feel like a lot of teachers don't think we need to bring these topics up, or that they are not relevant, maybe, in elementary school, but I think...maybe having some certain days

when we need to talk about topics like [trans identity] or anything else—I think we should...set the time aside...and educate them more, and that way when there are trans students in the class, or maybe if somebody is questioning, then they will...feel more comfortable, because at least everyone else will understand as well.

In all, I found that teachers were more reactive than proactive in making their specific support for transgender students clear. Some teachers, though, did describe inclusive efforts that were specific to transgender students:

I have been working really hard to stop saying ‘ladies’ for soprano [and] alto [singers] and ‘men’ for tenor [and] bass.’ I...would verbally correct myself in front of my kids and I will say... ‘ladies—I’m sorry, I should say sopranos and altos’ because we now live in a time where different students are not going to be all [cisgender].

We don’t have boys against girls...there’s nothing where they’re forced or being asked to divide up based on their biological makeup, we don’t have ‘boys do this, girls do this’...nothing in our classroom is set up that way. So it’s all about where you identify, if you identify that you want to go do the gardening project, or you want to go do this project...so you have boys and girls mixing all the time.

[If I had a trans student in my classroom] I would have to be super hyper aware of using gender-neutral pronouns or using the correct...gender pronouns. ...Most of my titles are not gender-specific.

Teachers were not usually willing to address subjects of gender identity and inequity in their classroom, instead opting for a generalizable approach to equal support. This, unfortunately, can cause fewer trans students to feel comfortable coming out in these classrooms, which in turn lessens the likelihood that teachers will be prompted to educate themselves about the supports necessary for transgender students.

Some teachers stated that more advanced classes would likely be freer to discuss topics related to transgender identity:

I teach advanced placement, and...we have topics that we have to cover that are widely diverse. ...we could be talking about any number of topics, really, to the LGBT community for certain in that class and it would be considered...acceptable for the curriculum. If it was to be a long conversation about gender identity in a lower level class, my administration may have an issue with that.

Middle and high school teachers...[are] a little more open-minded. They study different subjects, whereas opposed to just the elementary teachers, they're learning just how to teach. So they may not have that science background, they may not have been exposed to certain things...what I have noticed is that middle and high school teachers tend to be more democratic.

Considering these ideas points to an expected difference between the readiness of elementary school and secondary school teachers to include transgender students, where secondary

teachers would be expected to have better preparation for including transgender students. The actual results, however, showed a level of preparation that was about equal between elementary and secondary teachers, where both were prepared to offer generalized acceptance but few were prepared to discuss specific efforts regarding transgender students.

*“That’s an Impossible Situation”: Pushback from Parents and Administration*

Sources of educator reluctance to discuss topics related to transgender identity were identified in the form of expected pushback from both parents and administrators. One form of such pushback was a limitation pressed on teachers to only discuss topics explicitly relevant to their subject curricula:

I would love to be able to talk to [my students] about [gender identity] if I was able to, but I just always wonder if the parents are going to be upset hearing their kid come home and talking about something that they may not be happy with or agree with.

That [LGBTQ+ history or literary characters] is not in our standards. We have a certain set of standards that we have to follow. ...The closest I’ve ever gotten to that would be...talking about community. Talking about how people are different in all different ways. But that would be it.

I particularly try to err on the side of not bringing up controversial things unless they’re related to subject area or something specific that we’re talking about...parents could go screaming to the principal and say ‘why were you talking about this in a [subject area]



class? And if I can't back that up, then I'm not going to bring it up because I don't want to come under fire for anything.

If [I were to have] a long conversation about gender identity in a lower level class, my administration may have an issue with that, just because it is not considered to be curriculum based and they want to make sure that...everything relates back to what we're trying to teach.

Meanwhile, other teachers expressed that they felt their job was not solely to teach their subject area, but also to help their students develop a sense of life skills:

I try to communicate to students that their job in the world is to be open-minded and open-hearted and accepting to people.

I try to always make the kids understand that...there are different points of view and just because it may not be what...you personally are used to, does not mean that it's wrong or weird. You have to...experience it and put yourself right in it in order to truly understand.

This kind of philosophy aligns with much educational research, but perhaps not always written curriculum. Because of this, teachers may express concern that any support they give for LGBTQ+ students may be seen as pushing a political agenda, something specifically discouraged by educational administration. One teacher described a situation of receiving parent pushback for promoting a safe environment:

I yelled at this other kid [for sexuality-based bullying] and I said you are not allowed to spew hate in this classroom. And the child went home, told his parent, and then the parent came down to the school and I was called to the principal's office and told...I was not allowed to promote my agenda. Even though my agenda was having a safe environment for my students.

When prompted to answer questions about how they would deal with pushback from parents or administration, participants gave a variety of answers. Some were more prepared to defend a transgender student's identity:

I think that if a parent was concerned about [trans identity] being brought up, we'd come in [and I'd ask] what is your biggest fear? What...are you concerned about? What do you not want your child to know about this? ...I mean, I would be asking a million questions to find out exactly what their issue is.

[Disagreeing with a parent is] an impossible situation because you want to honor the kid but the parent is the one wielding the legal...everything [sic]. So as long as the parent is that legal guardian, I will address the student with their preferred pronouns as long as I can get away with it.

While others felt that such disagreements might not be appropriate:

It's tough dealing with parents. All you can do is listen and...take what they say and then do what you're going to do in your classroom and hope that you can...guide that student, help them in any way that you can.

Guidance in the form of professional development or legal guidelines would assist in this situation by providing a clear path through these disagreements, and the lack of such guidance puts teachers in a position where they must decide on their own their level of responsibility in ensuring a transgender student's safety.

*"A Learning Experience": Looking to Students for Direction*

Given the responsibility, as one individual, to make decisions about the best practices for a transgender student's livelihood—often tough and complicated decisions—with little to no guidance, educators often turn to their transgender students to become more educated on the subject and allow the students to pave the way for a more open, understanding, and inclusive classroom. Mostly, this comes in the form of educators meeting individually with transgender students and discussing what their needs look like:

I don't know what the next step would be. I think it's all a matter of supporting them on what their next step is.

As long as [the student] were okay with it...I would feel like it's a little bit of a learning experience for myself [to have a transgender student in the classroom]. ...I would be curious to get to know what their life, their walk, their struggle is like. So not to make them feel like they're an experiment, or...there to teach me something, necessarily, but I

would like to learn and grow as a person as well from having the experience of teaching a transgender individual.

I [would want] to make sure that I provide a positive, encouraging environment for [a] transgender student, and...I would not want them to feel uncomfortable, so I'd have a lot of communication with them and their family to see what the best steps would be.

It depends...how public [a trans student] wants to make [their transition]—it depends on everybody, they might want to just transition quietly and not really tell people, or...they would want it to just be over with and everyone knows, and they don't have to think about it too much, but...it really depends on the student.

Some participants interviewed for this study also expressed that they would happily allow a student to speak to the class if they so desired. While there is nothing wrong with allowing a student to determine and communicate their needs, there are certain aspects of asking students for guidance that have the potential to create issues. Doing so requires the student to temporarily switch their role in the classroom from student to teacher, a role which a student may not be ready to assume. Even students who are uncomfortable taking on this role may feel that they must do so if they have attributed their teacher with the authority typically associated with the social role.

Though the individual is certainly the best source for the specifics of their support, the onus of explaining basic concepts about transgender identity and defending their own existence should not be placed on a student. Students have taken on the role of coming to the classroom

primarily as a learner rather than an educator, and should not feel that they have to switch these roles if uncomfortable or unwilling.

*“That’s Kind of Stuff I Should Know”: The Search for Resources*

With very little protocol in place at the district or administrative levels and issues in looking to students for too much guidance, teachers are left on their own searching for resources. Among the teachers interviewed for this study, I found that many had made their own efforts to find resources for supporting transgender students, whether prompted by having a trans student in their own classroom or knowing of a colleague who had a trans student in theirs. One of the most common ways I found teachers searched for resources was contacting friends or colleagues they knew to be more familiar with the LGBTQ+ community:

The first thing I would do is text my sister...I would call her and be like...what are the resources that I need? ...I would immediately go to her and I’m lucky in that way but I don’t off the top of my head know [of resources for transgender students].

I don’t really know everything that’s out there. I guess I would just look it up. Google it, find out what’s available. Go to the counselor. We’re taught to go to the counselor.

We don’t have much LGBTQ-specific stuff at our school...if [a student was] looking for something at school outside of myself I would refer them to our guidance counselors because they are trained to know resources like that. ...I know about [two local centers for LGBTQ+ youth]. So those would be two directions that I would point people in for information.

We do have an on-site school psychologist and a social worker as well as our guidance counselors, so I would probably point [students exploring gender identity] in that direction.

The town that my school is in would basically have zero resources. There are bigger cities nearby where I would direct [a trans student]—LGBTQ resources I would direct that student to.

Often, however, efforts to find resources proved futile for some teachers, as the teachers were incapable of finding resources describing the best practices for supporting transgender students. This is not due to a lack of resources—I was able to quickly put a guide together to send to participants (see Appendix B)—nor any sort of incompetency on the part of the teachers' research skills. Rather, teachers who are not involved in LGBTQ+ communities themselves are often unaware of the resources available that connect activism to education and thus also unfamiliar with the key terms necessary to find relevant guidance.

I often mentioned GLSEN (formerly known as the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network) in the interviews conducted for this research, and to my surprise found that only one of the participants was familiar with the organization and their work. Most expressed that while they were sure there was an organization with the purpose of supporting LGBTQ+ students that existed, they did not know what that organization would be:

I don't know any specific groups...that I would probably refer [students exploring gender identity] to, but I do know that there are groups out there in our community that would be able to help them...I know that [resources are] available, but I couldn't tell [students] or you off the top of my head...these are the people to go immediately to speak to.

This [resources for trans students] is something I've researched. ...I've literally spent evenings Googling.

As I'm talking to you I'm realizing...I would be relying on other people to give me the resources and support [for transgender students], and that's kind of stuff I should know.

As is evidenced by the analysis of results thus far, it is not as though teachers are unwilling to help include trans students in their classroom. They are simply overwhelmed by concepts less familiar to them and not prepared to incorporate the concepts into their teaching styles. Nearly all the teachers interviewed expressed that they would greatly appreciate an increase in LGBTQ+ focused professional development such that they could learn better how to support their transgender students without having to rely on the students themselves doing the education:

I think a lot of teachers aren't educated themselves [on transgender identity], and...they can't really educate the students if they themselves aren't educated, so I think there should be some required trainings for teachers with that.

I don't think that the education system has enough experience with [trans students], and I don't think that they have rules for [how to handle trans students]. ... To say 'this is what you need to do, this is how you should accept it,' or 'this is how you should say things.' I just don't think...that's in place.

It's a shame as a teacher that we don't have more training on these sorts of things.

...about 3 weeks ago we went to what they called a sensitivity and cultural awareness training. And I walked out of there thinking, what did I really learn? It was a waste of time in my opinion. They basically just taught us strategies for how to teach all students, rather than how to address more specific issues or how to talk about more specific issues or how to be sensitive to...different types of people. ...I thought that there was a great opportunity that was really a missed opportunity.



## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the participants in this research study, teacher support for transgender students currently exists mostly in the form of generalized acceptance. Because legal or administrative protocols involving transgender students are few and far between in the current time, it is likely that implementing these protocols in school districts or schools would help more teachers to feel comfortable in choosing to support, include, and discuss transgender identity in their classrooms. There is an adverse side to legal protocols, however, in that historical precedent has shown freedom given to the discriminators rather than those who are discriminated against, and it is likely that certain school districts would simply write into law the right of a teacher to choose not to support a transgender student in their classroom.

Thus, the best solution seems to be increasing the prevalence of professional development specific to caring for transgender students in an educational environment. Several organizations listed on the resource guide in Appendix B are working toward this goal but have not yet been integrated into mainstream professional development, as evidenced by this study's participants' lack of awareness concerning these specific resources. To better normalize support for and inclusion of transgender students in an educational environment, more connections need to be made between the resources and those searching for them. LGBTQ+ based professional development courses for educators, increasing in number despite some reluctance and pushback, would be one of the best ways to make these connections.

While working toward more professional development relating to transgender students, teachers can implement certain practices in their classroom to help transgender or gender-questioning students feel more welcome (Sadowski 2016b). Such practices include enumerating support for transgender identity when talking about protections against bullying, shifting away

from using binary gendered language when addressing a classroom or individual students (e.g. “boys and girls,” “ladies and gentlemen), and teachers introducing themselves with their pronouns (she/her, he/him, they/them, etc.) in order to normalize this process in their classroom.

To help with pushback from parents and administrators that might occur when enumerating this support, teachers can look to join a union—the National Education Association provides resources and advice to teachers fighting for social justice issues on their webpage, stating “that educational advocacy and social justice advocacy go hand in hand” (National Education Association 2018).

#### *Implications for Further Research*

The research in this study is in no way comprehensive, and more research in this topic should be performed. I had the good fortune of encountering participants who were all open to the idea of supporting transgender students, but teachers less open-minded in this regard still exist, and it is important to have conversations with them to see what kinds of development might help encourage them to support transgender students, if any.

Additionally, the research I conducted resulted in a focus on teachers in large urban areas (though some participants were from more rural areas). Investigation into the differences in transgender student support between urban teachers and rural teachers would be a worthwhile follow-up to the findings in this study.

Finally, it is *vital* to record as much as we can about transgender student experience in public school. Throughout the background research I conducted for this study, I found very little about the experience of transgender students in United States public schools. The GLSEN school climate survey is the best resource out there in this regard, and to corroborate its findings and

demonstrate how transgender students can best be supported, we will always need more qualitative research that speaks with the students themselves about their experiences.

Further research questions might include:

- How would transgender students characterize their public school experience?
- What reasons do teachers cite for choosing not to support transgender students in their classrooms? What might prompt this decision to change?
- How does support of transgender students differ between teachers of urban and rural areas?
- Do transgender students who attended public school feel that their teachers were prepared to include them?
- What improvements do transgender students suggest to better their inclusion in the educational system?
- How have perceptions of transgender students changed over time?

APPENDIX A  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your prior experience with transgender students?
2. How familiar are you with the coming out and transitioning process for transgender youth?
3. Can you tell me about the resources you are aware of that are available for students exploring their gender identity?
4. Do you know if your institution has any resources available for students exploring their gender identity? What would prompt you to recommend these resources to a student?
5. How important do you think it is to create safe and inclusive environments for students exploring their gender identity? Can you tell me about any procedures you have in place that would ensure such an environment for a transgender student?
6. How comfortable do you feel with the idea of having a transgender student in your classroom?  
\*Do you know what the term “cisgender” means?  
(If yes, move to Q7. If no, explain that ‘cisgender’ refers to individuals who identify with their assigned birth sex, then move on to Q7.)
7. What, if anything, would you do differently from cisgender students when meeting individually with a transgender student?
8. What, if anything, would you do differently from cisgender students when meeting with a transgender student's parents or guardians?
9. What, if any, activities related to transgender identity have been integrated into your classroom?
10. What, if any, discussion has occurred in your institution regarding the integration of activities related to transgender identity?
11. What potential barriers do you see to integrating activities related to transgender identity in your classroom?

APPENDIX B  
RESOURCE GUIDE

## **Resource List for Teachers Looking to Support Transgender Students**

**The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)** provides resources for educators looking to support transgender and gender-nonconforming students on their website, including a webinar on best practices and a model district policy on transgender and gender nonconforming students.

**Web Address:** <https://www.glsen.org/>

**Webinar:** <https://www.glsen.org/article/educators-support-trans-and-gnc-students>

**Model Policy:** <https://www.glsen.org/article/transgender-model-district-policy>

**GSA Network** offers resources for building a GSA (gender and sexuality alliance/gay-straight alliance) alongside a network of already existing GSAs.

**Web Address:** <https://gsanetwork.org/>

**LYRIC Center for LGBTQ Youth** references an initiative to transform schools on their website.

**Web Address:** <http://lyric.org/school-transformation/>

**PFLAG** is the “extended family of the LGBTQ community...made up of LGBTQ individuals, family members and allies.” Their website references a publication on making schools safer.

**Web Address:** <http://www.pflag.org/>

**Publication:** <http://www.pflag.org/cultivating-respect-safe-schools-all>

The **Rainbow Book List** is “an annual annotated bibliography of books with LGBTQ-related content recommended for children up to age eighteen.”

**Web Address:** <http://glbtrt.ala.org/rainbowbooks/>

The **Safe Schools Coalition** is “a public-private partnership, in support of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender, queer and questioning youth, working to help schools become safe places where every family can belong, where every educator can teach, and where every child can learn, regardless of gender, gender identity or sexual orientation.” Their website contains a section (slightly outdated) with links to more resources.

**Web Address:** [http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/RG-gender\\_nonconforming\\_trans\\_youth.html](http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/RG-gender_nonconforming_trans_youth.html)

***Schools in Transition: A Guide for Supporting Transgender Students in K-12 Schools*** is a resource guide “providing a blueprint for safe, supportive and inclusive school environments for transgender youth” *put together by* The National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), Gender Spectrum, the ACLU, the HRC, and the NEA. A download link can be found on the website for the Human Rights Campaign.

**Web Address:** <https://www.hrc.org/resources/schools-in-transition-a-guide-for-supporting-transgender-students-in-k-12-s>

**Welcoming Schools** is “the nation's premier professional development program providing training and resources to elementary school educators to welcome diverse families, create LGBTQ and gender inclusive schools, prevent bias-based bullying, and support transgender and non-binary students.”

**Web Address:** <http://www.welcomingschools.org/>

**Transgender Specific Resources:** <http://www.welcomingschools.org/resources/school-tips/transgender-youth-what/trans-how/>

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