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Abstract

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Liberation and Inclusion Through the Voices of Trans Youth:

A Phenomenological Approach

A Dissertation in Practice

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Klaudia Neufeld

August 2023

Advisor: Dr. Lolita Tabron

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Chapter One: Introduction	1
An Introduction to Trans.....	4
Background to the Problem	4
Statement of the Problem.....	12
Purpose of the Study and Research Questions.....	12
Research Questions	13
Theoretical Framework.....	14
Definition of Terms.....	18
Limitations, Delimitations (Scope), and Assumptions	20
Significance of Study.....	24
Contribution to Existing Scholarship	24
Practices in the Field	25
Policy/Decision-Making	26
Chapter Summary	27
Chapter Two: Literature Review.....	28
Literature Review Roadmap	30
Literature Search and Screening	35
Search Criteria.....	37
Search Terms and Databases.....	38
Data Screening	40
Data Analysis	41
Cis-normativity	44
Legislation and Its Impact on Youth.....	55
Chapter Summary	59
Chapter Three: Methodology	63
Researcher Positionality.....	65
Lived Experience	67
Impacts on My Research.....	70
Qualitative Methodology	71
Approach to Inquiry	72
Research Sample	75
Sampling Strategy	76
Qualitative Methods.....	78
Research Design.....	80
Data Collection	82
Semi-Structured Interviews	83

Data Analysis Procedures	83
Trustworthiness Strategies	85
Ethical Considerations and Validity	86
Confidentiality and Consent	87
Chapter Summary	88
Chapter Four: Findings	90
Theme 1: Gender Identity Transition Process	104
Theme 2: Navigating Geography, Safety, and the Impact of School Culture	109
Theme 3: Belonging Through a Coalition of Community and Friendship	122
Theme 4: Youth Lessons Learned and Recommendations for School Leaders ...	126
Disconfirming Evidence	132
Chapter Summary	137
Chapter Five: Conclusions	139
Trans Femme Voice Lacking	139
RQ1 Conclusions Situated in Literature	141
RQ2 Conclusions Situated in Literature	144
RQ3 Conclusions Situated in Literature	146
Implications	147
From Theory to Practice	149
From Theory to Policy	151
From Practice to Theory	152
Chapter Summary	158
References	161
Appendix A: Interview Protocol	180
Appendix B: Parent or Guardian Consent/Permission Form	186
Appendix C: Assent Form	190
Appendix D: Youth Marketing Email	193
Appendix E: Reflexive Journal Prompts	194
Appendix F: Member Checking Feedback to Action Form	195
Appendix G: Peer Debrief Feedback to Action Form	196

Chapter One: Introduction

We need, in every community, a group of angelic troublemakers. Our power is in our ability to make things unworkable.

—Bayard Rustin

Max is 14. Their pronouns are they/them. Max was assigned female gender at birth. They were raised as a girl, strictly adhering to cis-normative societal expectations that they play with dolls, wear dresses and line up with the other girls in the school line. As Max began middle school, their external and internal identities began to separate, and they saw themselves more comfortable in shorts and a t-shirt, befriending boys and resisting the norms of gendered activities such as birthday parties, friendships, and expectations. It was at this time Max wanted to be called by a different name. Max is fortunate, with parents who support their gender identity exploration. While Max has been able to adeptly navigate a shifting identity in their world, many individuals in Max's life still struggle to understand gender is simply a construct. Many others in their own school express their unique gender identity along a dynamic spectrum from non-binary to queer to trans. Max's story is not occurring in isolation; Max is part of an increasingly visible and audible group of trans youth, those I refer to as the angelic troublemakers, who defy gender norms and challenge systems to change the way gender is viewed. Max is the hero of their own story. They own their narrative.

Current statistics estimate that 5% of young adults in the United States identify as trans, or as a gender different from their sex assigned at birth (Brown, 2022). We see many leaders in the trans community taking positions of power, celebrity, and scholarship. In 2019, Representative Brianna Titone demonstrated here in Colorado that trans individuals can successfully run for and be resoundingly elected to serve in public office, a giant political stride toward representation, voice, and visibility for the local trans community. Delaware state senator, Sarah McBride, is making history as the first trans woman running for U.S. Congress. Celebrities such as Laverne Cox and Elliot Page have seen remarkable success in their careers as out trans individuals. Page has shared his transition across social media platforms to humanize his identity and normalize the medical transition process. These moments of exception are truly exceptional progress towards trans liberation. This is not a trans moment. Trans individuals belong.

Yet, a closer look into the lived experiences of trans individuals tells a much different story. When trans identities are obvious to others, trans individuals face discrimination, oppression, harassment, and violence. Trans visibility goes hand in hand with risk (Keenan, 2017). Combine a growing visibility of trans identities throughout all facets of American culture with a stoic, uninformed or misinformed perception of how trans individuals contribute to our society, and we see inherent risk in simply showing up and existing. Harm extends beyond misinformation to a deliberate, concerted effort to silence, erase and pathologize trans identities. Substantial data from sources ranging from educational literature to medical journals show that schools reproduce the detrimental deficit narratives, pathologization and erasure of identities that trans individuals

encounter in broad society in modern United States (Horton, 2020). The harm trans youth encounter in secondary schools are the by-product of cis-normative school curricula, policies, architecture, and practices that render trans identities unrecognizable and undesirable (McBride, 2020). As visibility increases and trans youth become more comfortable with sharing their identity, it has become even more imperative that their lived experience be documented and understood. With visibility comes vulnerability. Protection and advocacy can extend only as far as knowledge will allow, and to elevate the voices of trans youth in the construction of their narratives ensures we glean a true and divine understanding of the beauty of a trans life. These angelic troublemakers can teach us about their lived experiences and the defiant joy that comes with being trans within systems and structures of oppression and erasure; they lead their own liberation.

In this chapter, I first introduce *trans* through the conceptual lens of trans activist, Leslie Feinberg, and renowned trans scholar, Harper Keenan. With a keen focus on trans youth in high school, I explicitly address the P-12 educational system and its intentional design to exclude trans youth, then show the resilience and defiant joy of these youth as they navigate these oppressive systems. I name the pathologization of trans identities and bodies through the deficit lens in which they are most often viewed, highlighting the dim realities trans youth share in impacted health and wellness, mental health outcomes, suicide rates and attendance issues at school. I will state the problem, set forth the research questions, and lay the groundwork for this phenomenological study, with the inclusion of key terms that will assist the reader with inclusive language related

specifically to the trans community as an intentional subgroup of the LGBTQ community.

An Introduction to Trans

The word *transgender* was introduced by trans activist Leslie Feinberg in 1992, a term designed to encompass complexity of a gender binary that is fluid and expansive. Feinberg connected the targeting and oppression of trans identities with European colonialism, identifying dominant understandings of gender as a result. Scholar Harper Benjamin Keenan (2017) describes queer and trans as “the limitless possibilities of bodily expression and stand in opposition to notions of finite sexual orientation categories or binary gender” (p. 539). While the language of male and female replicates cis norms, *trans* is the foundation of inclusive language that does not conflate sex assignment with gender identity. Youth today identify along the broadest spectrum of gender and sexual diversity than in the past, and these youth exist in their skin with bold authenticity as many generations of youth had no freedom to express.

Background to the Problem

Yet trans youth in schools are at the heart of much debate and vitriol across the United States and beyond. Their bodies have become negotiable, and their identities highly contested in public spaces. Politicians such as Florida’s DeSantis are building their brand of hate with platforms that explicitly target trans youth; legislation is being passed weekly in 2023 that perpetuates harm and vulnerability of trans youth in their communities. District and street level leaders must enact local policy decided in board rooms and state houses by politicians. Decisions being made at the national and state

level are bleeding into the school systems, exacerbating inequities for trans youth. Wide-sweeping anti-trans legislation pervades society, stripping away rights and escalating harm, risk, and danger for trans youth. A proverbial line of demarcation is being drawn between those states working to develop trans-inclusive policies and those states politicizing the bodies and identities of trans youth (ACLU, n.d.). For those unaware of the targeted discrimination against trans individuals, the 45th president of the United States was elected to office with a platform that included support for federally funded conversion therapy for gay and trans individuals (Stack, 2016).

Anti-trans legislation across the United States includes book bans on trans topics, prohibiting classroom discussion on gender identity and sexual orientation, censoring resources at school, preventing trans youth from participating in sports and access to safe, gender inclusive restrooms. On July 1, 2022, a Florida law went into effect that is commonly referred to as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill. Introduced as H.B. 1557, this law prohibits schools from “encouraging classroom instruction about sexual orientation or gender identity in primary levels” (ACLU, n.d.). Not only does this erase queer and trans history and literature, but it also forces trusted adults to make choices about “outing” youth who privately come out to their teachers or school staff.

In just the past year, over 300 bills targeting LGBTQ youth have been introduced across our country, most of these focused on trans and non-binary youth. Spaces that should be safe and secure are now the battleground for trans youth identity and inclusion. Anti-trans legislation comes in the form of restrictions of accessing an accurate school id, curriculum restrictions, excluding trans youth from sports, single-sex facility restrictions,

and healthcare restrictions (“Legislation Affecting LGBTQ Rights,” 2021). These healthcare restrictions block trans youth from access to their own transition. Currently, 18 states across the nation have active laws that ban trans youth from participating in sports consistent with their gender identity. An influx of anti-trans bills has been introduced at the start of 2023, with politicians in the eye of this brewing hate storm discussing not only a ban on bodies but more extremely the “eradication” of transgenderism (Wade & Reis, 2023).

Table 1.1

Bans on Trans Youth in Sports

2020	2021	2022
Idaho	Alabama	Arizona
	Arkansas	Indiana
	Florida	Iowa
	Mississippi	Kentucky
	Montana	Louisiana
	South Dakota	Oklahoma
	Tennessee	South Carolina
	Texas	Utah
	West Virginia	

Source: Movement Advancement Project, 2023

Policies, with effective implementation, can affirm trans youth. Policies driven by fear and anti-trans sentiment exact detrimental impact within school systems. What is rolled out at the national level plays out at the local and district level within the school system. Leaders’ actions and policies enacted either affirm or oppress. As an affirming

resource, sex education curriculum can include gender diverse relationships and identities. Privacy policies can be enacted to ensure trans youth are not forced to disclose their gender identity, or “come out” in school. However, we see in the past three years policies being enacted across the U.S. that are exclusionary and inequitable, making access to support and services at school even more unlikely. Exclusionary practices spread over each system of school and impact trans youth in their academic endeavors, sports, and simple daily aspects of school life.

Trans bodies and identities have been pathologized, and gender diversity has been problematized and disregarded (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018). The unintended consequences of this pathologization are the dehumanization, silence, and erasure of trans youth. Denying a student to dress according to their chosen gender identity is a subtle form of discrimination and pathologization. Requiring a student to use their given birth name (dead name) rather than their chosen name is another form of pathology and discrimination. More explicit forms of pathologization include blocking trans youth from engaging in sports and competing with those who align with their gender identity (Horton, 2020). Trans individuals have also been viewed from a deficit lens, perpetuating their marginalization, and making them targets of victim narratives. A deficit narrative intentionally communicates the falsehood that they need protection. Consequently, trans youth must navigate a system where individual concerns may be addressed yet structural inequalities and systemic oppression that breeds harm goes unaddressed (Smith & Payne, 2016). It is precisely this perpetual tension of vulnerability-in-resistance that is the catalyst that enlivens trans youth’s everyday acts into apolitical force capable of

disturbing institutionalized cis-normativity. The dangers associated with being, speaking, and congregating were generated precisely because, in under-taking those acts, trans youth were embodying a new form of gendered life that ruptured the citational chains of cis normativity within their schools (Butler, 2016).

In 2022, residents of the U.S are living through a mental health crisis primarily impacting trans and non-binary youth (thetrevorproject.org). Rates of suicide, poor mental health, digressing attendance, and dropout rates disproportionately impact trans youth as they encounter this oppression. The Trevor Project's 2022 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health found that over half of trans and non-binary youth have seriously contemplated suicide in the past year, with 20% of those trying to die by suicide (Trevor Project, 2022). Statistics show that most trans youth feel unsafe at school simply because of their gender expression or being "out" with their identity. Three quarters of trans youth avoid gender specific restrooms in schools because they feel uncomfortable and unsafe. Over half of those who were a part of the Trevor Project's 2022 National Survey reported that they were forced to use a restroom that did not align with their gender identity. Half were forced to use dead names or were identified by incorrect pronouns by those in positions of power and authority in schools. Additionally, the data shows that trans youth who are targeted for their gender expression are 3 times more likely to have attendance impacted. The inequities abound where trans youth are excluded, erased, targeted, and oppressed by the system responsible for their academic and social development. Sadly, schools are home to some of the greatest oppression and inequities trans youth experience. The education system is a microcosm of cis-normative

structures built to create unsafe cultures of exclusion for trans youth, as reported by GLSEN in 2017.

Table 1.2

School Experiences of Trans Youth

75%	70%	60%
Transgender students felt unsafe at school because of their gender expression.	Transgender students said they avoided bathrooms because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.	Transgender students had been required to use a bathroom or locker room that did not match the gender they live every day.
50%		3x
Transgender students were unable to use the name or pronoun that matched their gender.		Transgender students who experience higher levels of victimization because of their gender expression are three times more likely to have missed school than other students.

Source: GLSEN, 2017

The U.S. education system is intentionally designed to exclude, marginalize, oppress, and erase trans youth. The cis-normative structures of school function to categorize bodies from the moment they are enrolled. School is a site for sorting and conditioning bodies into the gender binary (Keenan, 2017). School systems reproduce and exacerbate inequalities rather than diminish them. Cis-normative school climates place trans youth under significant, consistent psychological stress (Ullman, 2015b). Schools can be persistently hostile climates for trans youth to navigate, forcing students to focus on survival rather than learning and thriving.

Daily encounters that rob trans youth from individual safety and perceptions of safety and inclusion impact educational access as well. Disadvantages within education are not individual but systemic (McBride, 2020; Ullman, 2017;). Trans youth who experience cis-normative micro-aggressions are forced to formulate strategies to navigate harm and exclusion, which results in increased hypervigilance and decreased well-being and access to learning (Greytak et al., 2013; Kennedy, 2018). Scholars are now emerging to advocate for trans liberation and equality in schools. As Horton expressed in his study, “We need to move beyond an exclusive focus on safety, on violence and on individual bullies and victims, to understanding and dismantling the systemic operation of cis-normativity in our schools” (Horton, 2020). This makes things unworkable in a system designed for trans youth to be erased has been the work of trans scholars and politicians, yet well-intended policies address individual or minor aspects of trans inclusive work, with a narrow focus on gender neutral restrooms or pronouns when what is needed are systemic trans-inclusive policies and high-quality inclusion training for all levels of education system leaders. Very few explicit trainings exist to inform educator practice or leadership toward inclusion of trans youth, exacerbating the inequities.

Schools replicate the oppression, marginalization and erasure seen in broad society. Trans youth have existed within the education system almost completely invisible; this invisibility is a primary component of cis-normative power in schools, rendering trans youth as “invisible minorities” (McBride & Neary, 2021; O’Flynn, 2016). In their attempt to show up authentically, be seen and recognized, are viewed by the system as disruptive, disrespectful and are met with harsh inequitable consequences.

Researchers assert that by the simple act of being “out” at school, trans youth engage in daily acts that resist cis-normativity (Hillier et al., 2020). Being out should be a joyful expression of one’s embracing the alignment of their internal and external identities, yet often out simply places a target on students who endure layered inequities because of their visibility.

School policies that perpetuate non-recognition and non-representation, conversational micro-aggressions that disregard and invalidate trans identities, pervasive bullying and physical harassment as well as educator bias are well documented factors that impinge upon the educational lives of trans youth (McBride et al., 2020). The way in which trans youth navigate the systems in school, which are designed for them to be invisible is a form of resistance; yet a focus on trans youth’s vulnerability through a deficit lens detracts for the ways in which they navigate and resist cis-normativity each day in school. As McBride and Leary (2021) note, “through individual and collective acts of resistance, trans youth are disrupting institutionalized cis-normativity in schools” (p. 1091).

Trans youth voice has been missing from the literature and from efforts toward inclusion and liberation within schools. Youth voice must drive systemic change, for who knows better what trans youth need than they themselves. Trans youth have been compelled to assume responsibility for the informal education of their peers and educators about gender identity in the absence of systemic inclusion and in the presence of silence and oppression. Trans youth have been actively directing this learning about gender diversity and expression within their schools (Bragg et al., 2018). Scholars

McBride and Neary (2021) find that “mobilizing their lived experience to provide a deeper understanding of trans identities, trans youth challenged cis-normative assumptions and motivations among peers and educators” (p. 1092). Institutionalized cis-normativity within schools harms trans youth by provoking a painful sense of unknowing oneself and a profound insecurity about their gender identity (Austin, 2016).

Simultaneous invisibility and intense scrutiny result in dire consequences for many trans individuals. Scholar Harper Benjamin Keenan (2017) addresses the fatal consequences of institutional invisibility, with the lived experience of Kyler Prescott, a 14-year-old trans boy in California, who died by suicide after a mental health care facility refused to honor his gender identity. This is just one trans life lost to the ignorant, blatantly detrimental oppressive systems trans youth must navigate.

Statement of the Problem

An embodiment of and in direct alignment with the oppressive white supremacist foundations of our country, the American public education system is intentionally designed to exclude trans youth who exist as marginalized humans outside the spectrum of cis-normative structures and systems, their voices silenced and identities erased from curriculum, systems of support, school culture, activities extending to scholarship.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to elevate trans youth voice to understand the meaning of the essence of their individual and shared lived experiences within school systems that have been designed for them to be silenced, excluded and erased. The intent behind this dissertation in practice (DIP) is to create a

phenomenological study with meaningful impact about the essence of what it means to be an openly identifying trans youth navigating the public school system. An out, or openly identifying youth, is one who knows who they are and have shared this information with their families and within their social circle. In this study, out has nothing to do with the cis-normative administrative structures embracing an open identity. Through elevating trans youth voice, a collection of narratives will speak to individual and shared lived experiences of trans youth in schools. A deep dive into identity and the distinct experience of openly identifying high school age trans youth will illuminate what has been previously shared by scholars primarily through reflective accounts given by trans adults and by educational practitioners. This dissertation is also designed to explore how school leaders might design high quality professional training for district and school leaders who stand in the gap for youth in schools.

Research Questions

I will use the findings from this study to inform a restorative curriculum that embeds inclusive language, equitable practices and protocols for discipline and mentorship as a means of advocating for the inclusion and liberation of trans youth from heteronormative structures and systems through asking the following questions:

1. What is it like to be an “out” trans youth in a public high school?
2. What are the shared lived experiences of trans youth within the public school system?
3. How can the shared lived experiences of trans youth inform policy and practice toward trans inclusion and liberation?

Theoretical Framework

Poet Rainer Maria Wilke stated, “Be conversant with transformation.” Trans liberation is the core of this work, with the foremost understanding that identities are non-negotiable. This theory, based upon Leslie Feinberg’s 1992 book *Transgender Liberation*, addresses liberation for those who defy human-constructed boundaries of gender. The spectrum of identities demonstrated by modern youth affirms that the gender binary is a myth. Originally a Marxist concept, trans liberation demands action and interrupting the oppression, marginalization, and detrimental narratives that surround trans bodies and identities. It is the call to action for educational leaders, who can either remain culpable or join in the work of liberation one administrative decision at a time.

Liberation Theory

Over time, trans voices have been elevated. Liberation Theory demonstrates the outside forces that must be engaged for change to occur. While scholars and activists can support and advocate, it is essential to the liberation of trans youth that we understand the barriers, acknowledge our culpability and roles in developing a collective intention. As Green (1994) noted: “We must be attuned and do the work of creating a collective intention and that intention is always to get more free” (p. 24). From the lens of trans liberation theory, scholars can better understand the resistance trans youth demonstrate within schools. Trans individuals have often led at the forefront of rebellions within the LGBTQ community in a fight for their visibility and inclusion. The Stonewall Inn rebellion of 1969 in New York City as well as the Compton Cafeteria uprising in 1966 in San Francisco were led by trans individuals in response to violence, hatred, and brutality

of police. These too were angelic troublemakers, paving the way for future generations to experience greater freedoms and inclusion. Feinberg was influential in demonstrating the role of trans individuals in movements and society, with a theoretical focus upon the roots of oppression upon marginalized populations (Wood, 2014).

Critical Trans Politics

This research is also framed by critical trans politics, originated by trans scholar and activist, Dean Spade, who advocates for the dismantling of systems that perpetuate violence and harm trans lives. This theoretical framework supports the structural rather than individualistic approach to trans advocacy and policy. In their 2021 study, Farley and Leonardi (2021) acknowledge the value of Spade's structural approach: "a focus on bathroom bills and policies regarding trans accessibility have distracted from a conversation that needs to be elevated to address broader structural issues and should ultimately be driven by ... trans youth" (p. 274).

In this legal equity theory of critical trans politics, Spade demands liberation through resistance, which frames not only the asset-focused lens of trans youth demanding visibility and inclusion, but also affirms these youth's identities as more than just a political movement. Trans bodies and identities should be valued outside a singular policy or case study, and each individual in the community holds value on their own and within the community as a whole. As Farley and Leonardi (2021) note, "The focus on narrow reforms and tactical policy change may serve to distract educational stakeholders...from a broader focus on cis-heteronormative school structures and cultures that negatively impact queer and trans students" (p. 354). Trans youth have unique

experiences that warrant distinct focus. Meyer and Keenan (2021) caution against an individualistic or isolated focus: “While the ongoing conversation about bathroom access has become the most common entry point into a discussion about trans rights and oppression, it also presents a problematically narrow view of the experiences of trans individuals” (p. 121).

Kumashiro’s Framework of Anti-Oppressive Education

This study also draws upon Kumashiro’s (2001) framework of anti-oppressive education. This framework includes four basic approaches to social justice education, which include:

1. Education for the other
2. Education about the other
3. Education that is critical of privileging and othering
4. Education that changes students and society

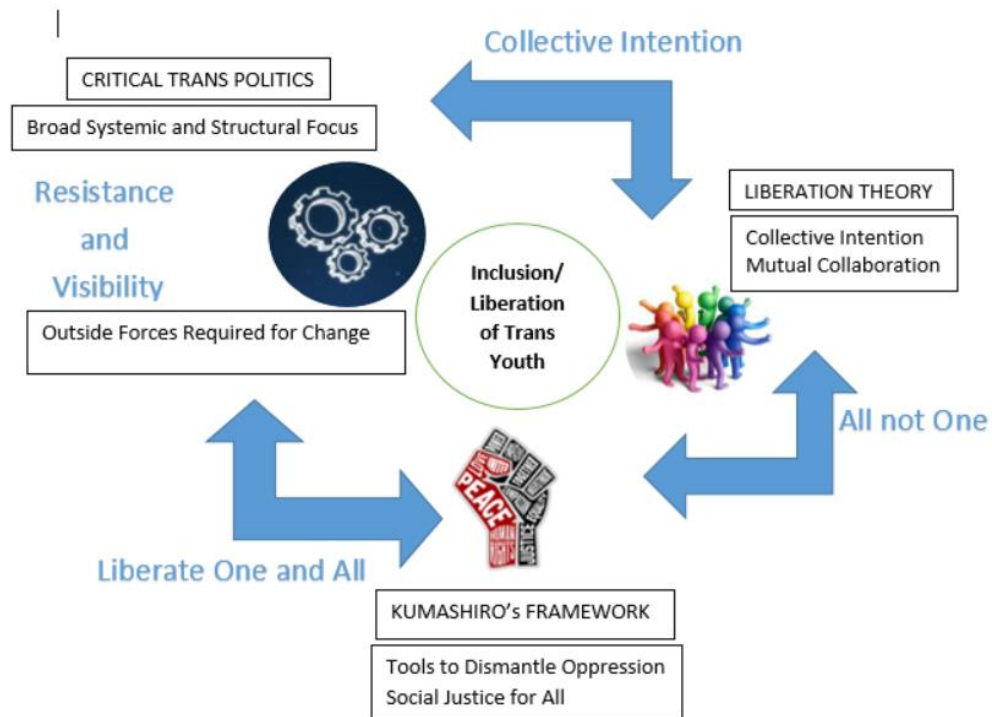
In defining oppression, Kumashiro (2000) speaks of education for the other, the “other” being outliers of the system to include all marginalized groups. These others who are oppressed include disabled individuals, those who identify along the LGBTQIA spectrum or “queer,” along with those whose racial identity lies outside of the normative dominant white culture: “Schools are spaces where the Other is treated in harmful ways” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 8). Understanding that trans youth encounter multiple forms of oppression within schools is key to realizing what educational leaders and educators can do to unlearn habits and practices that perpetuate this oppression. The framework not only addresses the oppression replicated in schools from broad society, but also provides

explicit tools for leaders to dismantle the oppression and take a strong stance on advocacy and inclusion.

Inextricably linked to Kumashiro's (2000) framework is the idea of resilience. Resilience theory provides a strengths-based approach and conceptual frame for understanding protective factors that enable trans youth to thrive despite their exposure to risk and harm (Zimmerman, 2013). Avoidance strategies, risk-confronting strategies and empowerment strategies were all identified as tools that trans youth employed as they showed resilience navigating oppressive school systems (Hillier et al., 2020). It is important to note that none of these three strategies need be employed if the educational system was designed to be inclusive of trans identities. The very resilience we celebrate in trans youth is necessitated by the oppressive system that marginalizes and erases trans youth. These theoretical frames are inextricably linked by their need for internal and outside forces for change, their focus on all individuals and the role each person plays in inclusion and liberation. When one is free, we can all be freed.

Figure 1.1

Trans Inclusion and Liberation Theoretical Model



Definition of Terms

In this section, I present eleven definitions relevant to my study. I include a list of common terms embraced by many in the trans community include the following, as defined by the Trans Youth Equality Foundation glossary.

Androgynous: Possessing both masculine and feminine traits. Presenting in a way that appears not entirely all masculine, or entirely all feminine.

Cisgender: A person whose gender identity corresponds to sex assigned at birth.

Cis-normativity: The social assumption that all individuals are cisgender and the gender binary is fixed/dynamic.

Heteronormativity: A way of being in the world that relies on the belief that heterosexuality is normal, which implicitly positions homosexuality and bisexuality as abnormal and thus inferior (Staley & Leonardi, 2016)

Intersex: A general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't fit the typical definition of male or female. Intersex people may have variations in sex characteristics including chromosomes, hormones, and/or genitals. Some intersex people identify as trans and/or non-binary.

Non-binary: An adjective describing a person who does not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between, or as falling completely outside these categories. While many also identify as transgender, not all non-binary people do. Non-binary can also be used as an umbrella term encompassing identities such as agender, bigender, genderqueer or gender-fluid.

Out: Describes youth who openly identify as trans within their social circle in their daily life. Significant to the lived experience, being out requires a trans individual to navigate conversation, interactions, policies and systems that are designed to silence and erase them. The lived experience of an out youth can involve a name change, shifting personal pronouns, and an appearance that a heteronormative culture might view as opposite their assigned gender at birth. Being out is a complexity to one's own journey of gender identity and belonging in spaces such as school. In this study, the focus shines upon this specific group of students as it

is imperative to understand how their lived experiences exist outside the frame of experiences of those within the broad LGBTQ+ community and from those who have chosen not to come out or share their gender identity. Yet the focus is upon outness as an internal decision made visible externally rather than a set of administrative functions, protocols, and permissions given to an identity.

Passing: Usually referring to binary trans people, “passing” means that someone is assumed by broader society to be a cisgender person of the gender they identify with.

Queer and trans: Refers to the limitless possibilities of bodily expression and stand in opposition to notions of finite sexual orientation categories or binary gender (Keenan, 2017)

Trans: Includes individuals whose gender identity differs from the gender which they were assigned at birth.

Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth.

Youth: Includes those students in public high schools ages 14–17.

Limitations, Delimitations (Scope), and Assumptions

In this section, I outline the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions for this study. They are listed as follows.

Limitations

Readers should consider the following three limitations as they interpret the findings of this study to inform practice and policy.

1. Trans scholars have been silenced. Censorship of trans scholars has led to limited access of trans scholarship, resulting in certain valuable sources potentially being left out of this study. Some sources may have been left out of this study. With the increasing assault upon the freedoms of trans youth in schools through state legislation across the country, emerging research is being written that I may have not accessed for this study.
2. Participants are minors, and I can only gain consent from parents and guardians who embrace their child's identity. Only the voices of participants with supportive families will be elevated in this study.
3. Data collection from round 1 and 2 of the semi-structured interviews will elevate a small sampling of trans youth from the community; this small sampling size may not be representative of the shared lived experiences of the broader trans community.
4. The geography of representation is a limitation that should be acknowledged. Other than rural conservative pockets, Colorado is a generally progressive state. The experiences of Colorado students will be much different than students who reside in places like Texas, Florida, and Oklahoma, where explicit, anti-trans legislation and governance rule. Trans youth across the country have lived experiences shaped in part by the legislation enacted and

enforced locally. States exist upon a spectrum of support or anti-trans legislation; this review does not capture the lived experience of youth who live outside of the state of Colorado. The study is limited to the type of experiences shared by students who attend a public high school in Colorado, which exists as a state that currently is the number one ranked state for legislation that protects trans youth (Transgender Law Center, 2022).

Delimitations

In this study, I delimited the scope of this study as follows.

1. I narrowed my geographic scope to participants who attend a Colorado public high school. I've chosen the state of Colorado because it is home to some of the most progressive trans-inclusive legislation, district and school level policies of inclusion, and a personal investment in the youth of my home state. Colorado is a leader in mental health support, transition services and inclusive policy for trans individuals. This population of trans youth have rarely been heard in current scholarship. I want to focus my attention and efforts to the system so that I can make recommendations which will support embedding trans inclusion throughout the system.
2. I did not include interviews with participants whose parents refused consent. Consequently, I was only able to elevate trans youth voice where youth are supported by parents and guardians. I will only select participants who openly identify as trans. This decision will shape the study and offer insights into the essence of the phenomenon I am seeking to understand. All participants have

either transitioned socially or medically. I want to elevate the voices of both subgroups to validate their reality and lived experiences, shedding light on their unique challenges and wins.

3. In this study, I did not break down the lived experiences of each subgroup within the trans youth community. For this dissertation, I will not dive deeply into intersectionality, though this is important work that has yet to be explored in trans scholarship to a wide extent. Future investigations could explore in depth each subgroup within the trans community. Each subgroup has a unique lived experience and this focus upon distinct subgroups could yield deep results focused upon their specific gender identity. In addition, the following assumptions exist within my study.

Assumptions

There are four assumptions that are that shaped my research decisions.

1. An epistemological assumption that I am making is that knowledge is gained through understanding the lived experiences of participants included in the study.
2. An ontological assumption that I am making is that as the researcher I bring my own subjectivities to this study. "...the researcher reports their values and biases they bring to the study as well as the value-laden nature of data they gather in qualitative research" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This assumption aligns with an axiological assumption that as the researcher my subjectivities are informed by lived experiences, upbringing, class, race, and other factors.

3. I am assuming that participants will answer questions openly and honestly. I am basing this assumption upon the fact that they are being given an opportunity to have their voice heard, and they will realize transparent truth will be a catalyst for change that could impact them and others in the future.
4. I am also assuming that much of the research that exists focusing on the lived experiences trans individuals is viewed from a deficit lens or is primarily focused on the hardship of walking around with their identity. I am making this assumption because we have yet to see dignity in treatment and support of trans youth, and because trans youth are still targets of discrimination within and without the system.

Significance of Study

Deficit narratives permeate scholarship. Much of the literature replicates notions of pathology and resilience, a spectrum that has a wide, gaping hole where desire-based trans scholarship will continue to emerge. My study departs from deficit narratives to create trans informed, strengths-based narratives informed by the very participants in focus. Results from this study have the potential to: (a) provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of trans youth outside the context of the lesbian, bi, gay (LGB) continuum within schools, and (b) inform research and practice. In this section, I described how this study contributes to existing literature, K–12 practice, and policy.

Contribution to Existing Scholarship

This study will fill gaps in literature where trans youth voice has thus far been silent and erased toward their own inclusion and liberation in school systems. Trans

youth voice will drive the recommendations for systemic change in curriculum that informs leadership at the street level, supporting these leaders as they interpret state and local policy. This study will help to shift the way trans youth are perceived through an asset focused lens rather than from a deficit lens. The study will inform inclusion training and trans inclusive policy development for current leaders within schools and will empower youth to lift their own voices toward liberation. This study will impact the visibility, dignity and inclusion of trans youth in public schools. This study will contribute to emerging research that elevates trans youth voice to raise awareness of the oppression, marginalization and exclusion within the education system so that practitioners can dismantle and unlearn cis-normativity.

Practices in the Field

bell hooks (1994) stated that, “the classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility” (p. 207). While the system continues to propagate cis-normative practices such as gendered restrooms and student lines, there is possibility for a dismantling of these systems through the dismantling of systems. An intense focus upon narrow reforms (Spade, 2011) will simply distract from structural and cultural inequities. Educational leaders and practitioners must shift their focus from a narrow gaze to that of particular, broad focus upon cis-normativity in culture to produce equitable, inclusive systems for trans youth to navigate (Farley & Leonardi, 2021). A significant body of research has shown the detrimental impacts upon trans youth within educational environments. Data shows that these youth report more frequent school-based harassment (Kosciw et al., 2014; Ullman, 2017). Elevating the voices of trans youth to make

systemic change in practice might involve intersectionality trainings, which would broaden the understanding of resilience of those trans youth with multiple identities marginalized within schools (Singh, 2012). This study and recommendations made within will challenge practitioners to acknowledge the climate towards trans youth in schools and take ownership in their individual and collective impact upon trans youth (McGuire et al., 2010).

Policy/Decision-Making

In their 2018 study, Ullman found that regarding support of trans and gender diverse students, school environments fell into two broad categories:

(1) those framing trans/gender inclusivity as an anti-bullying initiative and working at the minimum policy requirements, and (2) those working beyond bullying discourses and policy frameworks to conceptualize trans/gender inclusivity as integral to the school's mission and as offering clear whole-community benefit. (p. 495)

Practice influences policy, just as policy impacts practice. The author asserts that what is required is adaptive leadership rather than reactive and compliant street level response to policy. Studies suggest that trans-inclusive policies are often narrowly focused on individual students, and rarely transform cultural norms of a system (Payne & Smith, 2017). Layers of current legislation exist that protect trans youth. Title IX is a federal law that prohibits sex discrimination in schools and protects trans students from bullying, harassment, and discrimination (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016). Trans students are entitled to protections within Title IX, at the federal level. Title IX is

enforced by the Department of Education through the Office of Civil Rights in all schools that receive public federal funding. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects the free speech and freedom of expression of all students, that including gender identity (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016). States such as California, Colorado, Connecticut, New Jersey, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington all have state laws that protect youth from gender-based discrimination. Yet, policy can be interpreted and implemented by educational leaders in a myriad manner.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I framed the background of the study as well as its intended purpose. I explicitly named limitations, delimitations, and assumptions, as well as introduced my foundational research questions. I defined key terminology and introduced a statement of the problem to provide context to the study and its purpose. In Chapter 2, I will review literature that elevates those scholars who discuss the lived experiences of and advocate for trans youth within historically oppressive educational systems. I will share my theoretical framework gleaned from scholars and provide a body of evidence for my dissertation, grounded in trans scholarship that disrupts deficit narratives and problematized narratives of trans youth.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

There must be a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures.

—bell hooks

In 2021, I attended the University Council Education Administration annual conference, the leading convening for P–12 educational leadership and policy in the United States, with hopes to learn more about existing scholarship in advocacy of trans youth. During the convening, however, I was surprised and disheartened to see the limited emerging research shared in the field of education leadership on trans-inclusive practices and policies that particular year, especially as we are seeing heightened, intentional targeting of trans youth in recent state legislation across the United States (ACLU, 2022; GLSEN, 2018; Hobaica et al., 2019). This experience prompted me to search for literature that both focused on and elevated the voices of high school age trans youth voice and their distinct lived experiences. Specifically, I wanted to understand the current state of literature with a focus on “out” trans youth, with an awareness that open identity and visibility often exacerbates instances of oppression and erasure in society and in schools (Horton, 2020; Keenan, 2017; Martino, 2022). Subsequently, the purpose of this review of literature is to elucidate the existing literature regarding out trans youth and

their unique lived experiences in public secondary schools across the United States within the P–12 educational leadership literature, as “Language is power, life and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation” (Carter, 2022, p. 1).

I reviewed the literature from a strengths-based lens and sought to elevate those studies that celebrated the resilience and beauty of the audacious identities of trans youth who are navigating systems designed intentionally for their identities, bodies and voices to be oppressed and erased (Frohard-Dourlent, 2020; Nicolazzo, 2021; Tuck, 2009). My deep connection to this work is rooted, in part, by my own journey with my trans identity and my desire to engage with scholarship that names, honors, and elevates the lived experiences of trans youth. It was imperative for me, as a queer individual who is only recently embracing my own trans non-binary identity to fully grasp what is being communicated as fact about trans individuals and who the thought leaders are in the field. This is personal work. I wanted to discover whose voices were being elevated in advocacy of trans youth. I learned from those trans scholars who argue that cis scholars conducting trans studies should remain silent and listen (Barszczerski, 2020). I sought to understand how trans voices have been erased from academic and social contexts and capture those studies which portray trans youth from a strengths-based perspective (Tuck, 2009). I asked myself the question: Who appears and who does not? Likewise, I was energized by scholar Sara Ahmed’s (2013) challenge to disrupt the status quo by recognizing, “To question who appears is to cause discomfort” (p. 1). Throughout the process of developing this literature review, I was prepared to grapple with my own

discomfort and lean into the ways my work could contribute to this movement of trans scholarship and liberation.

My aim in this literature review was to learn how other trans and trans-inclusive cisgender scholars have engaged trans youth in transformational ways that disrupt systems of oppression and erasure. Through the unlearning and learning done within this review, I hoped to gain clarity about strategies of scholarship and educational activism I can employ in my work toward liberation and inclusion of trans youth as well as concepts and language developed by respected scholars and academics (Nicolazzo, 2020; Serano, 2016; Staley & Leonardi, 2016). A top priority for me in this literature review was to learn from those trans scholars who have contributed to scholarship so that I am well-informed and theoretically sound in honoring these youth through my study (Miller, 2022; Nicolazzo, 2017; Stewart, 2022). I perceive this literature review as a privilege, with the intent to clearly convey what we know now about liberating and celebrating gender identity in service of creating systems of schooling that are inclusive for trans youth. Trans youth have unique experiences that warrant distinct focus and celebration (Lewis & Eckes, 2020; Meyer & Keenan, 2018).

Literature Review Roadmap

The aim of this literature review was two-fold: 1) to examine how cis-normative systems within research and schools impact the daily lived experiences of trans youth, observing how trans youth employ their resilience and vulnerability to navigate and dismantle systems of oppression and marginalization in public schools, and 2) to demonstrate how trans-exclusive legislation serves as a tool of oppression and erasure

that impacts trans identities and bodies, through policy implementation by school leaders.

I draw from Sara Ahmed's (2013) concept of screening techniques, referring to:

how certain bodies take up spaces by screening out the existence of others. If you are screened out (by virtue of the body you have) then you simply do not even appear or register to others. You might even have to become insistent, wave your arms, even shout, just to appear. And then of course how you appear (as being insistent) means you still tend not to be heard. (p. 2)

I used Ahmed's framing of screening techniques to structure the review of my literature. I organized my literature review using buckets in order of my process to include cis-normativity, the opposing scholarship of deficit narratives and desire-based frameworks, trans identities, legislation and its impact on youth, and the role of education in trans experiences. I quickly discovered that cis-normativity is the machine of oppression and erasure that drives all inequities for trans individuals, from the literature to the classroom and extending out into broad society. Essentially, cis-normativity in schools is simple replication of societal oppression and marginalization (Frohard-Dourlent, 2018; Horton, 2022; McBride et al., 2021; Martino et al., 2022). I wanted to simply name and highlight my findings.

I began the first broad section of my literature review by naming and exploring cis-normativity as the social construct that categorizes and holds bodies. I dove into cis-normativity in P-12 research as well as in broad society, to capture a clear understanding of how bodies and identities are assigned value and how trans individuals are othered and erased in a culture dominated by cis hetero white men (Keenan, 2017). Second, I explored the under-representation of trans voices in scholarship, both of scholars and of participants. I dove into the deficit narratives perpetuated about trans individuals, which

is a social reproduction evident not only in broad culture but also in the literature. I define *deficit* as a pejorative term that further alienates marginalized groups and individuals with a false narrative that presents them as broken, lacking, or less than. Tools of racist, oppressive cis-normativity, deficit thinking perpetuates a hyper-focus on supposed attributes of a specific community or subgroup that puts them at risk. Deficit thinking is an intentional tool that promotes false narratives and further marginalizes minoritized individuals. Even seemingly well-intended scholars are perpetuating what scholar Eve Tuck (2009) refers to as “damage-centered research” (p. 409). I evaluated how scholars document trans identities as broken and pathologized victims as a reproduction of deficit narratives (Nicolazzo, 2015). I documented scholars who blatantly forwarded these narratives, and also identified those scholars who unintentionally, as a direct result of cis-normativity, perpetuated the myths with a focus upon the damage and brokenness of the lives of trans individuals. I dove deeper into Tuck’s work to learn more of the counter to these deficit narratives.

Within the context of cis-normativity in research, I focused upon desire-based frameworks, a counter-narrative constructed by scholar Eve Tuck (2009), which “simultaneously acknowledge the pain of the past as it affects the present, and pull the trans-temporal wisdom, hope, and vision of the community in focus into the future to create change” (p. 417). Current literature is full of deficit frames of minoritized groups. These frames produce violence and erasure. Acts of violence are directly correlated with the language produced in legislation, district, and board policy, as well as scholarship. Erasure is a consequence for communities who have deficit narratives spewed upon them,

with hate speech often disguised in a journal article or political rhetoric. As transphobic and trans-exclusive language permeates narratives constructed in society, rates of harassment and acts of violence increase. Deficit narratives are directly linked to damage within a community. In what Tuck (2009) refers to as the antidote to damage-centered research, I explored desire-based frameworks “concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (p. 416) of trans individuals. Toward this end, I delved into two separate theoretical frameworks to identify desire-based scholarship that elevated and included trans voices. The first framework scholars embedded in their approaches was Kumashiro’s framework (2000) of anti-oppressive education, studies in which scholars sat with participants to elevate their voices and lived experiences. I also sought to understand the phenomenon of the trans lived experience through Dean Spade’s critical trans politics (2015), seeking to understand how policies have impacted representation for trans youth in academic and social contexts.

I also explored trans identities represented in scholarship within the broad LGBTQ umbrella, with a distinct trans focus, and in consideration of intersectionality. Understanding that the subset population of trans youth experience distinct realities within the education system, I sought to understand how a specific trans focus was represented in literature and to what extent intersectionality of trans youth has been explored. I navigated emerging research of scholars such as Nicolazzo and Catalano (2015) to understand what aspects of intersectionality have been explored from a strengths and desire-based approaches, while also paying attention to those deficit

narratives that exist in scholarship forwarding damaging narratives about how complexity breeds brokenness (Horton, 2020).

The second broad focus of my literature was legislation and the ways in which it operates as a tool of oppression that impacts trans individuals, historically and within the current political context. I shared a broad overview of current national anti-trans legislation to illuminate immediate need for trans inclusion and liberation in our systems. I wanted to understand the lengths at which policies are designed and implemented toward the inclusion of trans youth in contrast to the exclusion of trans youth. I explicated the difference between an individualistic approach from a structural approach within policy and implementation, highlighting Spade's notion that trans liberation is impeded by a narrow focus upon single issue bills such as gender-neutral restrooms, which take away from the broad structural issue that perpetuates trans-exclusive structures and systems (Farley & Leonardi, 2021; Meyer, 2022). I also sought to understand when and where trans youth voice was evident in policy and practice, and where adultism prevailed. Within this bucket, I wanted to capture studies that highlighted promising practices of street level implementation as well as those studies that illuminated harm and impact upon trans youth.

Within the discussion of legislation, I explored the role of P-12 school systems and the impact of policy implementation upon trans youth. I dove into how social reproduction has perpetuated cis-normativity in education, and how cis-normativity evokes harm which requires trans youth then to be resilient. Through an asset focused lens, I explored the resilience of trans youth in education systems and sought to

understand where protective factors were in place to support, include and celebrate trans youth. I also sought to show where trans youth exercised their vulnerability and resilience to navigate oppressive systems designed to erase their identities and voices. I found guidance documents that showed promise related to areas of trans inclusion in schools, and then summarized by literature review to capture the learning. In the next section, I share my search strategy and how I defined the scope of my literature review.

Literature Search and Screening

I chose to use a scoping review of the literature, beginning with the first phase of developing the research question. Understanding that my research questions are the foundations of the study, I framed my questions in three parts, focusing first on the individual experience; second on shared experience; and finally on the implications for pedagogy, practice, and policy based upon those experiences. I proceeded to the next step in the scoping process which is developing the inclusion criteria. This was an iterative process, as I dove first into broad literature then refined my criteria to focus on trans scholarship. I developed my comprehensive search strategy next, then set forth to search relevant databases. During this process, I looked specifically at dissertations and peer-reviewed studies. I also hand-searched journals and articles that included names of scholars whose scholarship I have learned from and collaborated with in person. I used committee feedback to include other scholar names and studies, and even contacted certain authors to extend my understanding of their scholarship. The next phase was to map out the data I had collected from my selected studies. Finally, I synthesized and

reported results. In the next several paragraphs, I explain in more detail my specific process in my literature review.

In this scoping review, I approached my literature search and screening process in a way that would allow me to provide an overview of the research on trans youth voice in P–12 literature, clarify concepts, and identify gaps in the existing literature. I conducted my literature search and screening through a four-step process. Initially, I developed search terms to retrieve as broad a scope on literature focused on trans youth in schools, setting only geographical focus upon the United States with no filters for time frame. I want to understand the specific reality of trans youth in the American public education system rather than to look more broadly at an international scope. Next, I screened my initial results to identify irrelevant studies. My exclusion criteria, or how I decided which studies were irrelevant, were studies that focused upon higher education, studies that were done outside the bounds of the United States, and filtered through studies with students who did not openly identify as trans. I then expanded my results to include international studies, and refined time frame from 2010–2021. During this process, I began with the largest Education databases to embark upon my search. This initial search included SAGE, ERIC, Academic Search Complete, and Google Scholar. In addition, I altered my search terms to include secondary school settings only, with international focus, from 2010–2021. My final step in the process was synthesizing my data using a coding process.

Search Criteria

I developed search criteria to clarify population, setting, and context (Boote & Beile, 2005), as well as study designs, research methods, and data sources to be included in the review. Five inclusion criteria were designed to align with the broad research question. Included studies needed to: 1) be an empirical study; 2) focus on the T of the LGBTQ and upon youth within public high schools; 3) appear in a peer-review academic journal; 4) be published between 2010 and 2021 to provide a clear historical context; and 5) include studies from other secondary schools across the globe. I sought empirical studies because they are more reliable, with a focus on real-life experience not just theories. I desired a specific trans focus because those are the youth for whom I am advocating in my research; I wanted to focus on the distinct and specific lived experiences of trans youth. The value of selecting peer reviewed articles is being able to filter out studies that do not align with my research framework and intention, yet I also considered the dominant voice in literature is that of heteronormative white males. It was my goal to include articles that were aligned with my research intentions. Focusing on articles from 2010–2021 allowed me to understand trends in educational policy, trans visibility in research, as well as how trans-focused legislation has changed over the years. I did find some value in learning about studies done with trans youth internationally, as it informed my ideas about shared lived experiences and the unique role geography plays into the reality of trans lives. The exception to the criteria is that if a study was focused in higher education but elicited information that would support my broad understanding and purpose, I would include that study.

Criteria selected ensured that my focus would deeply honor the unique lived experiences of trans youth rather than share a broad sweep of the diverse experiences of queer youth. Criteria necessitated that high quality empirical reviews would inform my review. Criteria will provide historical context to the topic and supported my aim for trans youth to be celebrated not victimized through an intentional asset focused lens. Criteria provided geographical context to policies, practices and systems that impact the lived experiences of trans youth; this enabled me to understand the nuances of culture and distinctive marginalization of trans youth ages 13–17 within public schools here in Colorado. This specific group has yet to be studied in depth because the complexity of the IRB process and the multiple steps a researcher must take to protect participants who exist as part of a marginalized and oppressed population or subgroup. It was imperative for me to glean as much information from existing literature to inform my study.

Search Terms and Databases

I mobilized five databases to complete my search: SAGE, ERIC, Academic Search Complete, and Google Scholar. I conducted a first search combining the key words “trans,” “youth,” and “schools.” Other key words searched include “transgender,” “inclusion,” “resilience,” “risk,” and “queer.” I chose these key words based upon my interest in centering trans youth voice, elevating their narratives on experiences where they navigate oppressive, exclusive systems yet demonstrate resilience (Stone et al., 2022). *Queer* is a search term that parallels labels within the broad LGBTQ community and served as a starting point for my inquiry. This first phase of my search produced a handful of articles that contributed to my learning, yet I needed to expand my search. At

this point in my search, I consulted with the educational research staff in the University of Denver library and chose to utilize a backward and forward snowball method from my start set of literature to garner more current and relevant studies for my review. In searching the databases, I strategically focused my review to peer-reviewed literature and journal articles from 2010–2020. Later in my process, as I analyzed legislation and its timeline and impact on trans youth in schools, I expanded my focus back one year to 2009 to include important literature in the field that coincided with the passage of the Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009 and other legislation at that time. With this expanded lens, I was able to capture literature and scholarship from a broad spectrum of scholars, locations, and content communities. As I sought feedback from committee members and respected scholars in the field, I uncovered many trans voices in more unconventional forms of literature. I found that some scholars have published their own publications and podcasts, which highlights what members of our community have known for years. Our voices are mostly silent in scholarship. Trans individuals and other LGBTQ scholars, activists, artists, and community members have always had their voices silenced and operate on the fringes or outskirts of mainstream society. These voices show up in places that are supposedly safe, yet all visibility marginalizes. Uncovering this gem of trans activism and a movement of literature and arts inspired me to consider how I could utilize portraiture more intentionally in my study to elevate the marginalized voices of my own participants. This is an act of inheriting the movement, and a series of intentional actions as a researcher to honor the lived experiences of those I sought to understand, advocate for, and collaborate to liberate.

Data Screening

Within the screening process, I chose to use the following search terms: *trans*, *youth*, *schools*, and *inclusion*. This search yielded 88 results using the ERIC (EBSCO) database. I refined this initial search by identifying only peer-reviewed articles, which narrowed my result to 30. The reason I specifically wanted peer reviewed articles was because I view it as the foundation of scholarship, work that has been reviewed and refined with opportunity for scrutiny and feedback within the system. I replicated my initial search terms to also include *policy* and *practice*. I began my foundation with these 6 articles, then expanded my search by looking through the Academic Search Complete database for the following search terms: *trans students in schools*. This search yielded 40 studies. I then utilized Google Scholar to search the following terms: *trans youth*, *secondary schools*, *cis-normativity*, and *gender* with the time frame set from 2010–2021 only in the United States. This search returned 101 peer reviewed articles, which I then carried forward into the data analysis process.

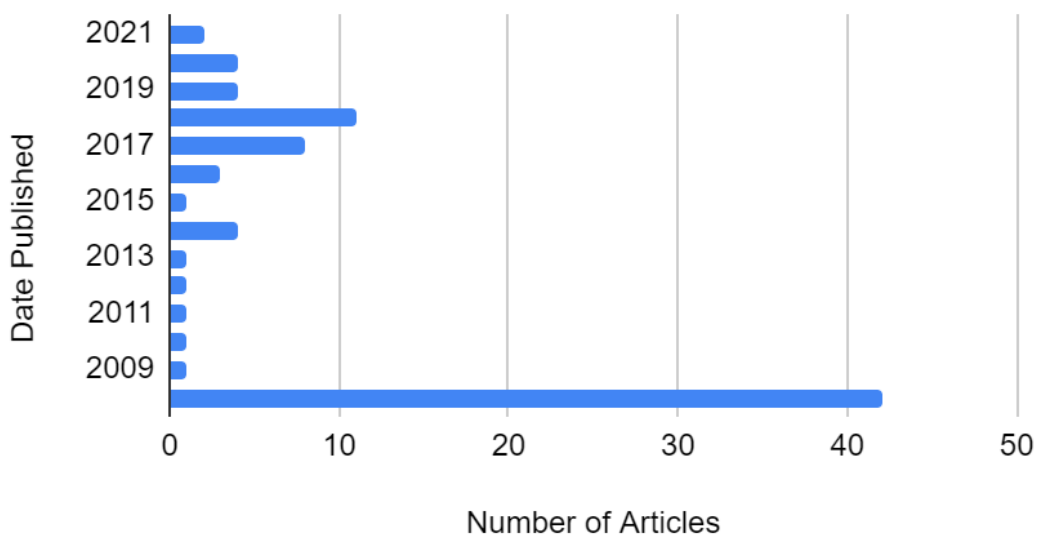
My data-screening process included four steps. First, I eliminated 26 duplicate articles. Second, I read all abstracts for the remaining articles (n = 75). I noticed that my results included educational leadership articles as well as sociological and medical journals. Third, I reviewed the full text of the remaining articles (n = 75) and eliminated articles based on the following exclusion criteria: (a) the article did not focus specifically on trans youth in education (n = 8); (b) the article did not focus on secondary students (n = 13); (c) the article was from a medical journal and disconnected from the purpose and design of this study (n = 12). After completing this step, I retained 42 articles for

analysis. I carefully conducted a forward and backward search and captured 3 additional articles for this review. Table 2.1 shows the visual distribution of articles along the 2009–2021 timeline

Table 2.1

Timeline of Literature

Number of Articles vs. Date Published



Data Analysis

During the data analysis phase, I first conducted a basic analysis of the literature, simply learning what scholarship existed and what the conversation had been to that point. I noted geographical context as well as documented the timeline of literature to have a clear context of relevance, referencing historic political and educational trends that might impact the narratives and focus of studies done with trans youth. Utilizing my literature review matrix, I then organized the studies by types of design. After receiving

crucial feedback from members of my committee, I analyzed carefully the scholarship of trans scholars to notice the difference in language, approach and perspective in their work and to understand the imperative nature of elevating not only trans youth but also trans scholar voice (Keenan, 2022; Nicolazzo, 2021; Stewart, 2022). This dual analysis proved to shift the trajectory of my focus, learning, and ultimately the shape of my study.

My initial searches of literature provided me with some insight into the direction and context of this dissertation, supported by findings that expose great need for future study. Existing scholarship does not legitimize or distinguish trans youth experiences from the broad experiences of LGBTQ youth (Lombardi et al., 2001; Velez et al., 2016). As trans youth become more visible in the school system, they are more likely to endure harassment and discrimination (Davidson, 2016). Trans students nationwide report higher levels of discrimination, more negative perceptions of school climates, and experience exclusion within the learning community at greater rates than cisgender students. A study by Dugan focused on 91 trans youth reported a lower sense of belonging and a greater feeling of hostility in school than did their cisgender peers (Dugan et al., 2012). Trans youth can provide valuable information about their distinct experiences in school and contribute to all phases of system change related to trans inclusive practices: problem identification, problem analysis, and intervention development and implementation, and evaluation (Clare, 2013).

The table below is a snapshot of some of my data sources, and reflective of the focus of studies found as well as the variety of publication sources. Educational leadership and scholarship are certainly just one of many publication sources, with much

focus on trans youth in sociology and health journals. In total, my data analysis included 26 educational publications or journals, 16 medical or social science journals, and 3 higher ed studies. I also incorporated one dissertation and 1 systematic lit review. In total, this study is founded upon research and scholarship gleaned from 42 data sources. Given feedback from committee members, I dove deeper into the literature to find more data sources from trans scholars and activists that helped to inform my literature review. This second dive proved to challenge me on my own understanding of the impact and existence of cis-normativity in research. Until I read authors such as Tuck, Nicolazzo, Miller, and Keenan, I was clear that my study could be more powerful informed by trans authors, written by a trans non-binary individual like myself, in advocacy for trans youth. This type of dissertation does not exist at the current time to the best of my knowledge and experience with examining the literature. Table 2.2 offers a visual representation of my initial data sources that demonstrates scholarship facilitated by researchers with trans lives in focus, much of which is adult-centered. I wanted to understand why so many scholars sought to understand the trans youth experience, but chose to seek information from school leaders, educators, and parents rather than directly from the source. The data sources I have embedded in my literature review have all played a distinct role in my learning and understanding of what currently exists and how scholarship can transform in service of the liberation of trans youth.

Table 2.2*Sampling of Data Sources*

Author(s)	Publication	Study type	Education setting	Voice/Focus
Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2017	<i>Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation</i>	Mixed methods	Higher education	Trans students
Meyer & Keenan, 2018	<i>Gender and Education</i>	Policy archeology	K–12	Policy analysis
Omercagic & Martino, 2020	<i>Frontiers in Sociology</i>	Case study	K–12	Policy analysis
Farley & Leonardi, 2021	<i>Educational Policy</i>	Sequential explanatory mixed methods	K–12	Parents/guardians
Singh, 2012	<i>Sex Roles</i>	Phenomenology	9–12, higher education	Trans youth
Staley & Leonardi, 2016	<i>Research in the Teaching of English</i>	Qualitative	K–12	Educators
Beese & Martin, 2018	<i>Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership</i>	Case study	K–12	Policy analysis
Austin, 2016	<i>Sex Roles</i>	Grounded theory	9–12, higher education	Practitioners
Hobaica et al., 2019	<i>American Journal of Sexuality Education</i>	Grounded theory	Retrospective adults	Practitioners

Cis-normativity

Cis-normativity is a social construct, a hierarchy rooted in the presumption that gender identity is static, privileging those who are “normal” or cis while simultaneously othering those who exist with dynamic, flexible identities who are then viewed as inferior

with their identities pathologized (Serano, 2016). Cis-normativity presents trans individuals from a deficit lens seeing trans identity as a deviation or variance. When scholars who choose to use the term “gender variant” are further replicating hetero and cis-normativity (Riley et al., 2013). A Variant is something “different” from the norm, something that diverges from the common. This use of language in studies written about trans youth is counter-productive, and part of the discriminatory narrative that pathologizes trans individuals (Martino et al., 2020). Embedded in a 2006 study on vulnerability and invisibility of trans youth, scholars Grossman and D’Augelli use the archaic descriptor of *transvestite* when referring to past studies. By its very nature, cis-normativity pushes the marginalized trans body to the margins and “others” that identity.

Cis-normativity in Educational Research

The process of educational research involves its own brand of cis-normativity. The norm in broad society as well as in scholarship is the cis or hetero-normative narrative, which sets those who embrace their definitive place along the gender binary as a fixed and superior position from which they can other and pathologize trans identities. Prevalent in both quantitative and qualitative data that I reviewed were researchers defaulting to cis-normative gender binaries. One scholar who advocates for “goodness in research” is D.L. Stewart (2022), who outlines the harm of trans exclusion in scholarship by saying, “researchers retain a gender binary that excludes trans* people from the conversation about gender diversity in institutional policy and practice” (p. 61). This also extended to researchers failing embed questions that allow participants to articulate their pronouns or preferred name rather than a pseudonym (Beese & Martin, 2018; Ullman,

2018). These are two technical and very surface level, yet still harmful, problems that appeared in the literature. Further, much of the scholarship presents trans youth from a deficit lens, focusing on their vulnerabilities and victimization rather than from an asset focused lens that highlights their resilience and resistance in navigating oppressive structures. (Grossman, 2006; Nieto, 2021; Ullman, 2018). Cis-normativity in research is also presenting trans youth as helpless victims who require a savior, some agent to help and guide and direct through their research. Focusing on trans youth's vulnerability predominantly through risk lens thus detracts from, and fails to account for, the ways in which trans youth navigate and resist educational cis-normativity every day (McBride & Neary, 2021). The contributing authors of a special issue July 2022 edition of *Educational Researcher* titled "Trans Studies in K-12 Education" asserted that it is possible and necessary that education research play a role in creating equitable systems and inclusive spaces in education for both students and employees of all gender identities. It includes a call to action for education researchers to take ownership and actively engage in trans knowledge, scholarship and history to impact policy, communities, and teachers (Mangin, 2022).

Cisnormativity in P-12 Schools

As in in broader society, cis-normativity permeates the entire culture of P-12 schools. Schools operate under the presumption of a singular gender norm. Institutionalized cis-normativity privileges those who identify and present under this hegemonic norm and assigned birth gender reproducing inequities, social inequalities, and deficit narratives and pathologizing rather than diminishing them, which are a

detriment to trans youth (McBride & Neary, 2021; Miller, 2016). As a result of the dominance of the gender binary, as well as the relative invisibility and marginalization of identities in mainstream social and cultural institutions (including schools, social organizations, recreation and sports, health and medical care, the military, and the media), finding oneself and constructing a transgender identity for most individuals is a multilayered process often wrought with confusion, uncertainty, and feelings of isolation (Austin, 2016). Schools perpetuate these biased, uninformed, and oppressive perspectives and discourse, which fosters hostile learning environments that trans youth must navigate (Miller, 2016). The oppressive gender binary is institutionalized, through division of students by gender in lines and competition, gendered restrooms, exclusive curriculum, and anti-trans policies. This institutionalized cisnormativity promotes bias and micro-aggression from adults in positions of power as well as from peers (Meyer et al., 2016). McBride (2020) asserts that “administrative policies of non-recognition and institutional norms of non-representation, cis-normative macro-aggressions erase trans embodiment and make trans youth invisible within secondary school settings” (p. 4). Because of a binary classification of gender, trans youth historically have been invisible in the education system. Oppressive systems have attempted to erase trans youth. Perhaps that is a direct result of a society that has been taught what is and is not sacred, that certain bodies and identities have value while others do not.

The Costs of Trans Visibility

While we will no longer accept invisibility in the system for our youth, visibility comes with vulnerability and potential harm. An increase in trans visibility equivocates

an increase in trans threat, vulnerability, and violent erasure (Gossett, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2017). Visibility is a limiting construct on which we should build toward liberation and freedom. Gender expectations and roles are placed upon these youth. When these youth do not comply, and their gender expression exists outside of that binary classification, trans youth are othered and targeted for victimization (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). Extending beyond micro-aggression, direct violence towards trans youth includes assault, harassment, bullying, derogatory slurs, and damage to personal property. McBride (2020) continues, "Cis-normative violence is thus explicitly regulatory, since it intentionally aims to police trans youth and punish students who disrupt cisgender binary gender norms" (p. 5).

Despite, trans youth endure oppression and lived experiences of institutionalized cis-normativity, they have mobilized their vulnerability to resist educational cis-normativity through a continuum of strategies that range in level of risk from avoidance strategies to empowerment strategies. Avoidance strategies include avoiding people and situations, ignoring misgendering and other awkward or dangerous situations, and selectively sharing their identity. Risk confronting strategies involve teaching the teacher, advocating for oneself, arguing, and fighting, and seeking support. Resistance involves youth breaking school rules, opposing authority figures, defying dress codes, becoming emotionally or physically confrontational with students and staff. Using a social reproduction theory lens, these behaviors are not seen as merely 'oppositional' or 'acting out' but rather are nuanced by the students' own explanations of their actions in the context of social inequality. Empowerment strategies encompass being out, demanding

respect, actively resisting the gender binary, and queering the schools (Hillier et al., 2020). They have resisted cis-normativity through establishing safe spaces for trans youth and building networks of support within their schools. The everyday spaces trans students occupied—public transportation, gendered bathrooms, locker rooms, and classrooms—represented places of risk and refuge from discrimination, harassment, mis-gendering and violence. Trans students learned to claim spaces and construct a sense of community with the help of trans and cisgender allies, thereby learning to live with, and beyond, fear (Hillier et al., 2020). All these strategies take the form of resistance. Through their resistance, trans youth slowly and deliberately form a social movement and community of care (Spade, 2015). Yet, resistance and fostering of community of care must shift from a micro level (sitting squarely with the trans youth) to systems change that includes the research community (Mangin, 2022).

Trans Inclusive P–12 School Environments

Reframing schools to be inclusive and liberatory for trans youth requires each individual to begin with their own work, contributing to the work of dismantling school systems that position certain bodies and identities to be vulnerable and erased. In inclusive environments, trans youth can more adeptly navigate and evolve their identity, finding their own place within their community (Day et al., 2022; Frohard-Dourlent, 2018; Goldberg et al., 2019; Simms et al., 2021). Trans inclusive environments are constructed through intentional commitments of educational leaders. Scholar CJ Miller (2022) outlines five commitments to shift conditions and mind-sets within schools with the vision of liberating gender identity. First, he recommends investing emotionally in the

wellbeing of trans youth. Next, he outlines a commitment to design strategies that address the inclusion of gender diverse students school wide. Next, he recommends planning and mapping new opportunities for youth to form new social relations. Finally, he recommends educational leaders commit to continually assessing how changes are working and inviting stakeholders to provide feedback to produce ongoing solutions to the work.

Critically interrogating school and district policies for trans inclusion is another way that school leaders can ensure gender identity and expression are not simply tolerated but welcomed. Surface level areas in which trans-inclusion matters are in school records, facilities and bathrooms, locker rooms, yearbook photos, transition plans, use of preferred pronouns and names, and in liberation of trans youth from harassment and gender segregation within sports, activities, and daily routines. This also extends to allowing students to have their preferred names and pronouns be honored, allowing them to dress in a way that aligns with their self-identity, ensuring trans youth are respected and protected as well as ensuring their personal information is held confidential under FERPA. Those who work with and advocate for trans youth should recognize the unique needs and serve as allies who create safe, inclusive spaces for them. These are minor changes needed within the systems and structures, which must also shift. Structural changes involve trans-inclusive policies and implementation by street level leaders, who in turn flood their system with high quality trans-inclusive trainings led by trans scholars and activists. Institutional accountability is a definitive area of need, as is action on environmental stress and cis-normativity. Schools should of course be proactively

sheltering students from local and state anti-trans laws under Title IX. These are simple ways in which a trans-inclusive environment can be maintained.

Essential to protecting youth in schools is to learn the strengths and challenges that trans youth possess. Protective factors include knowledgeable adults providing trans affirming resources and supports, inclusion in mentoring programs, and establishing community. Trans youth possess their own internal assets, family connections, relationships at school, and community that serve to protect them while navigating exclusionary environments within the system (Eisenberg et al., 2017). Understanding the needs of vulnerable populations regarding their health risk behaviors and aspects of the social context that can provide support is critical to the development of appropriate prevention activities (Eisenberg et al., 2017).

It is the responsibility of each leader, scholar, activist, and advocate to reflect upon the ways in which we are causing harm, then “reconstruct a society that embraces all gender identified differences so that we can liberate gender identity in schools” (Miller, 2018, p.78). Hobaica et al. (2019) put out a call to action to show how invaluable the information we can glean from these voices is to providing trans informed information about trans identities in secondary education and how centering their voices and experiences could reduce the confusion, stigma, and the severity of dysphoria as well as encourage earlier identity recognition, development, and transitioning, resulting in improved mental health outcomes and trans-inclusive, equitable educational opportunities for trans youth. This call to action within the existing literature is a disruption in the imbalance of power and a commitment to divesting from structures that replicate harm

for the marginalized members of the community. All the learning from education research must translate into direct action for trans youth. Elevating trans youth voice shifts the power to the students, empowering them to be agents in their own liberation.

As noted by Frohard-Dourlent (2020), “student-centered approaches should be enhanced by a lens attentive to cis-normative cultures and institutional constraints that both students and educators have to navigate” (p. 339). Scholars Farley and Leonardi (2021) collected 2 years of survey data from parents and guardians of trans youth. These authors utilized sequential explanatory mixed methods to survey 69 parents and guardians over the span of 2 years regarding the role of policy and its impact on school support. The authors found:

a focus on bathroom bills and policies regarding trans accessibility have distracted from a conversation that needs to be elevated to address broader structural issues and should ultimately be driven by families and trans youth. By focusing on bathrooms, the debate necessarily remains fixed on the physical form and allows the cisgender gaze to determine the authenticity and acceptability of trans bodies. (Farley & Leonardi, 2021, p. 280)

Often the most public debates around trans inclusion in schools focus on bathroom access and use and pronouns. In 2016, Scholar Gerson asserted “public restrooms are not just toilets; for more than a hundred years, they have implicated questions of who really belongs in public, civic, and professional life” (p. 28). Farley and Leonardi (2021) asserted, While the ongoing conversation about bathroom access has become the most common entry point into a discussion about trans rights and oppression, it also presents a problematically narrow view of the experience of trans individuals in the United States. This narrow view perpetuates the myth of the powerlessness and pathology of marginalized trans youth, as well as contributing to their erasure.

Neoliberalism functions as a root cause for trans-exclusion and erasure.

Neoliberalism can be defined as a mode of governance that produces identities, subjects, and ways of life driven by a survival-of-the-fittest ethic. It plays out in schools through the design of dominant power groups and the attempt to invalidate trans identities. It is important to note that trans bodies are not negotiable. As Miller (2018) notes, “Gender identity is never singular nor easily located within rigid or fixed gender binaries” (p. 71). Holding fast to a supposed fixed binary does not negate the validity and value of an individual. Placing oppressive policies upon a trans youth will not result in these youth abandoning their self-identity. Schools are designed to enforce conformity, yet gender identity is self-determined. Neoliberalism serves to control and maintain members of a community (Giroux, 2012). Miller (2018) continues, “Neoliberalism...functions similarly to a prison by interlocking bodies to authority, where gender norms are regulated” (p. 71). In their case study, Beese and Martin (2018) discuss a trans youth in a California school who was “allowed” (or forced) to use a single stall restroom and a private changing room in the locker room. While this individual approach may seem inherently responsive, Beese and Martin (2018) highlight the indignity this youth suffered by the board decision not to allow this youth access to the locker room and to be singled out in front of their peers. A more systemic approach of inclusion would be a policy that enacted gender-neutral restrooms, or a complete reconstruction of these sacred spaces altogether as Laidlaw discussed in their 2020 article. Inclusion of trans youth voice in the construction of school structures and policies would ensure a greater level of trans inclusion and balance the power between adults and youth in schools.

One way neoliberalism plays out in schools is through the distribution of power to adults in positions of authority. *Adulthood* refers to all the behaviors and attitudes that flow from the assumption that adults are better than young people and are entitled to act upon young people in many ways without their agreement (Austin, 2016). Adulthood is an important systemic oppression to examine as it influences the lives of trans youth. The dominance of young people by adults is a harmful abuse of power within schools (DeJong & Love, 2010). This imbalance of power suggests that youth are inferior and subject to control by adults who supposedly have a voice and identity that holds more value than the youth. If everyone has valuable assets to contribute to their community, a powerful shift in practice could have positive systemic impact.

It is crucial to include trans students in identifying and addressing needed systemic changes (Shriberg & Fenning, 2009). The act of engaging trans students' perspectives, experiences, and recommendations may also represent a form of empowerment for them (Ingraham, 2015). It is vital to understand how trans-exclusive educational experiences may affect trans individuals' physical and mental health outcomes, as well as their self-conceptions and relationships in the world around them. During this crucial time in history, when school districts, local and state politicians assert their voice, opinion, religion, and values upon trans youth, it is essential to understand the role of education. What are the essential functions? How do educational leaders implement trans inclusive policies despite wide-sweeping anti-trans legislation and sentiment? What are the responsibilities of schools and their leaders, and what impact do these individuals have upon trans youth? To become clear on what the role of educational

leaders must be in trans inclusion and liberation, it is imperative to grasp the federal, state, and local legislation that is being passed down to these street level leaders (Leonardi & Staley, 2018; Omercajic & Martino, 2020).

Legislation and Its Impact on Youth

Wide-sweeping legislation across the United States is being passed even in legislative sessions to discriminate, exclude and pathologize trans identities. Many of these youth also now navigate systems that are implementing trans-exclusive bills and policies passed down through state legislation (ACLU, 2022; GLSEN, 2018). Several states throughout the U.S. have policies enumerating protections for students based on sexual orientation; far fewer have policies that include protections based on gender identity and expression. The exclusion of gender identity from such policies is of particular concern given that federal guidance to extend Title IX protections to include transgender youth has been rescinded (Day et al., 2018). Seven states explicitly prohibit inclusive curricula: Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas (GLSEN, 2018).

Title IX legislation enforced by the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the Department of Education (DOE) has been used to challenge discrimination experienced by trans youth in schools. In 2016, the DOJ and DOE issued a “Dear Colleague Letter on Transgender Students” (Lhamon & Gupta, 2016). In the “Dear Colleague Letter on Transgender Students” of 2016, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) communicated policy guidance to ensure school districts across the United States were following legal parameters of Title IX legislation. The 1972

Title IX legislation prohibited sex discrimination in educational programming and activities within systems that received federal funding for their operations. The “Dear Colleague” letter identified several specific areas in which trans students must receive equitable treatment and access. This letter generated significant resistance and placed trans students in harm’s way right in the middle of a societal culture war. In 2017, Keenan claimed that trans stories were finally being told and “identities [were] recognized by those in power” (Keenan, 2017, p. 538). Trans liberation would be impeded by the 2016 presidential election of what Nicolazzo (2017b) framed, “a White supremacist, xenophobic, and transphobic ideologue who may very well look to repeal the already limited rights and protections of trans people across the country” (p. 212). The appointment of Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education was another blow to trans youth in schools. DeVos was immediately labeled “a danger to transgender children” (Ford, 2018, p. 24), and began undoing much of the progressive work towards trans inclusion and liberation, with her first action of withdrawing the “Dear Colleague” guidance. These extreme, explicitly harmful bills must be met with systemic change rather than narrow reform. Emerging scholarship honors the trans youth experience distinct from the broad LGBTQ+ youth community (Lombardi et al., 2001; Traux, 2018; Velez et al., 2016).

However, there some scholars urge caution about using the judicial system for trans liberation. Critical trans scholar, Dean Spade (2011), offers a warning that the lived experiences of trans individuals are not significantly improved through narrow reform and tactical policies. Spade is the first openly transgender tenure-track law professor in the United States. He asserted that policies and laws normalize and solidify existing

oppressive structures, even when they are designed to advance the rights of marginalized individuals such as trans youth. He asserts that policies and laws contribute to the oppressive structures, reinforcing heteronormative ideals and the gender binary (Spade, 2011, 2015). Legislation can be the cause of harm and oppression for marginalized youth including trans students. Spade's *Critical Trans Politics* coherently connect the lived experience of trans individuals with legislation imposed upon them. He addresses the use of law to exacerbate the inequities steeped upon certain marginalized groups, specifically trans individuals. Dean Spade (2011) argued that limits exist in law, stating, "Administrative systems that classify people actually invent and produce meaning for the categories they administer, and those categories manage both the population and the distribution of security and vulnerability" (p. 178).

Spade is also the author of *Mutual Aid*, a resource in which he explains how caring for one another while we work to change the world is a radical act: "Dean Spade offers readers a map for what critical trans politics can do to combat the violence done by the uneven distribution of life chances under social programs and legal practices" (Levitt, 2022, p. 62). Through the lens of critical trans politics, Farley and Leonardi (2021) illuminated potential limitations of law for liberating these youth and suggest that "policies designed to support trans youth can further entrench the status quo and reinforce potentially damaging ideas and practices" (p. 275). For example, scholars Farley and Leonardi collected 2 years of survey data from parents and guardians of trans youth. These authors utilized sequential explanatory mixed methods to survey 69 parents and

guardians over the span of 2 years regarding the role of policy and its impact on school support. Farley and Leonardi (2021) found that:

a focus on bathroom bills and policies regarding trans accessibility have distracted from a conversation that needs to be elevated to address broader structural issues and should ultimately be driven by families and trans youth.” By focusing on bathrooms, the debate necessarily remains fixed on the physical form and allows the cisgender gaze to determine the authenticity and acceptability of trans bodies. (p. 280)

Often the most public debates around trans inclusion in schools focus on bathroom access and use and pronouns. Another example that illustrated this point was a 2018 study Meyer and Keenan published of three education policies intended for the safety and inclusion of trans youth and found policies limiting in impact on lived experiences of trans youth. This study and others assert that enacted policies lack in clarity and guidance, which then lacks support of trans youth (Leonardi & Staley, 2018; Meyer & Keenan, 2018). A hyper focus on individual issues such as anti-bullying (Ullman, 2018) distracts from the systemic heteronormative structures that perpetuate gendered harm. Aligned with the Social Reproduction Theory, Roberts and Marx (2018) go so far as to say these policies move beyond neutrality to harm, perpetuating social injustice. For those seeking transformative change, policies and laws can prove ineffective (Farley & Leonardi, 2021). Goals of formal legal equality undermine the disruptive potential of trans resistance and threaten alliances built across systems of social stratification like race, class, and ability. Most legislative change has come as a direct result on an individual issue, rather than broad systemic change. Additionally, policy, which is not typically written by or developed in consultation with trans youth

themselves, is usually based on a narrow concept of what it means to be trans. This conception is only viewed through a lens of normative dichotomous gender binary and fails to account for other institutionalized forms of categorization that shape the life of these youth (Frohard-Doulent, 2016; Keenan, 2017). No policy can fully encapsulate the complexity of human life.

Chapter Summary

My review of the literature contributed to a few major takeaways. First, cis-normativity is perpetuated through damage-centered research that shapes the contours of discourse and framing of bodies and identities and approaches to liberty. In this literature review, I have given examples from research and in schools to provide a focus on both discourse and conceptualizations. The second takeaway is that the legislative system can further harm upon trans youth because of cis-normative beliefs that permeate the intent, language and impact of trans-exclusive legislation. Harm to trans youth is exacerbated by individualistic approaches and adultism that also play out in the legislative process and products. I have focused upon the processes and systems used to effect trans liberation. We in the United States have much work to do in normalizing gender diversity and embracing equitable experiences for all. Trans identities are not negotiable, yet they seem to be problematized, pathologized and misunderstood in schools and in legislation. Deficit narratives continue to be perpetuated in board rooms, school hallways, legislative sessions, and policy. While there is some good research that addresses trans youth and intends to advocate for trans youth, there exist few studies that have produced tangible trainings, recommendations, and implementation for trans-inclusive practices. Certain

concepts were clarified for me as I dove into trans scholarship, learning how other trans scholars viewed themselves and framed that positionality in their research and advocacy. Throughout this literature review, I was able to ascertain the value of systemic approaches to trans-inclusion and policy versus the individualistic approach, which ultimately requires trans youth to carry the onus for adults but also does little to disrupt systemic issues of trans-exclusion.

One initial finding is that scholarship has identified schools as a site for significant oppressive experiences for trans youth (Kosciw et al., 2016). Resounding data showed that through cis-normative structures and the pathologization of trans identities, schools reproduce oppression. Scholars Staley and Leonardi drew from Kumashiro's framework of anti-oppressive education in their 2016 study with educators, seeking to understand culpability of those in positions of authority in school and to "lean in" to the discomfort of owning their individual and collective role in that oppression (Staley & Leonardi, 2016). The literature consistently elevates experiences and voices of educational leaders when investigating oppression; few studies focus upon the lived experiences of trans youth to understand the oppression endured. Some scholars argue that policy is the vehicle to make change and improve the educational experiences of trans youth, while others assert practices can be shifted to bring about inclusion of trans youth.

Significant gaps exist in literature. Across systems and across research fields, research has been done about or on trans youth rather than with or alongside them. My study will center trans youth voice. The silence of trans voice resonates with me. Not

only is trans scholarship in education limited, but consistently we see that trans youth voice is missing from the literature. The individual stories of trans youth are not evident in the literature body. Their unique perspective is nearly absent from even emerging research. Current research focuses on the experiences of educators and administrators who work with these youth (Ullman, 2018). These studies center adult learning. Other studies broadly address LGBTQIA youth, while some focus upon the retrospective lens of adult trans individuals (Hobaica, et al. 2019). The subset of trans youth studied the least are minors. For those who have endured the IRB process, this may seem to make sense, yet the labor of enduring time and paperwork to ensure the voices of trans youth are elevated seems insignificant and worthy of effort on the part of scholars. The resounding gap are desire-based, or strengths-based, studies done between trans youth and trans scholars. My research will address and begin to fill that gap. There is a significant need for trans scholars to work alongside trans youth to learn what their lived experiences are like during this climate of vitriol and exclusion of trans youth in school and society.

In this way, my study will contribute to an emerging body of trans-focused scholarship that elevates trans youth voices about their own visibility, inclusion and liberation. By centering the expertise of trans students on their own individual lived experiences, a narrative is shared that can disrupt cis-normative practices and trans-exclusive learning environments (Frohard-Dourlent, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2009)). Only when trans youth can be seen and heard for their unique lived experience can we ensure trans inclusion and liberation in our educational systems. Trans youth are the experts in

their lived experience. Elevating trans youth voice, centering their lived experiences through deliberate trans-inclusive, empowering practice and scholarship, is a step toward liberation. As with all liberation, no one is free until every individual is free. Liberation can come only when everyone belongs in their community. There is freedom in commitment. The greatest need my study can fill is for me to provide a heart-centered study that is borne out of my own unlearning and metamorphosis to elevate those trans youth who lack inclusion and liberation. By freeing myself, I can also strive toward the liberation of others. Leveraging my privilege and positionality in service of trans youth will prove to be my greatest contribution to scholarship and community. Investigation toward understanding the unique lived experiences of trans youth in secondary schools through phenomenological reflection will be explored in the upcoming chapter.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Our insanity is not that we see people who aren't there. It's that we ignore the ones who are.

—Andrea Gibson

Scholars Tuck and Yang (2014) cautioned researchers against replicating or reproducing oppression through their scholarship, while Keenan (2022) addressed the role academic research plays in contributing to the lack of clarity around gender. The author posited their belief that researchers who seek to support trans individuals must proceed with care and integrity (Keenan, 2022). With a firm belief that trans studies can inform methodological practices in educational research, I employed intentional ethics in this study and leaned heavily upon trans studies, as I simultaneously elevated trans youth voice and trans scholarship to create a refined study that makes a positive systemic impact. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) asserted that, “power relations are everywhere, including in the research study itself” (p. 62). It was my intent to design a study that centers the voices of and empowers trans youth. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to elevate high school age trans youth voice, ages 13–17, to understand their lived experience as openly trans identifying youth navigating systems within secondary public schools. I sought to answer the following research questions:

- Research Question 1: What is it like to be an “out” trans youth in a secondary public school?
- Research Question 2: What are the shared lived experiences of trans youth within the public school system?
- Research Question 3: How can the shared lived experiences of these trans youth inform policy, pedagogy, and practice toward inclusion and liberation?

The purpose of this chapter is to detail how I addressed these three research questions with the intent that readers walk away with a clear understanding of how I conducted the study. I designed this desire-based study to contribute to emerging scholarship focused on trans inclusion that elevates trans youth voice. This research project aims to illuminate and celebrate the shared lived experiences of trans youth within secondary public schools, with a keen focus upon the defiant joy and resilience required to navigate systems designed for these same youth to be marginalized, oppressed and erased as well as a firm commitment to produce rigorous scholarship that contributes to knowledge production centered on the exceptional lives and voices of trans youth (Keenan, 2022; Gill-Peterson, 2018). I used the findings from this study to inform recommendations for high quality trans-inclusive K–12 leadership training programs designed specifically for district and building level leaders. The intent behind this study is to disrupt cis-normativity and the deficit narratives that problematize and pathologize trans identities to intentionally produce what scholar Harper Keenan (2022) refers to as “trans competent educational environments” (p. 308).

I begin my discussion by situating my research questions and research design within the qualitative frameworks of phenomenology. Then I discuss my setting and context, as well as sample. I document the steps of my data collection and analysis process. Finally, I discuss what I perceive to be the limitations of my research and address the ethical considerations of my study. In the next section, I share my individual researcher positionality and discuss the ways my positionality has shaped this phenomenological study. I discuss my methodology and approach to inquiry. Additionally, I explain my qualitative methods with rationale for selecting the participants I chose then discuss data collection and analysis processes.

Researcher Positionality

Integral in the process of qualitative research, positionality must be articulated to show the interconnectedness and intention of design. While articulating one's positionality cannot ensure higher quality research, it does produce a more refined researcher (Gary & Holmes, 2020). The process of learning about oppression involves an awareness of oneself, an introspection to identify culpability and one's position within systems in which they exist. Understanding the complexity of privilege, identity and power is crucial. As a student scholar, I acknowledge my privilege. I also acknowledge that I have been complicit in my own pedagogy and practice when enabling or enforcing the heteronormative systems of oppression of "others" unlike or like me. Articulating my positionality clarifies the connection to and intent behind my passion for research activism as it impacts trans youth in schools.

I identify as a queer, non-binary individual within the broader LGBTQIA community, linked to participants by this umbrella community and our shared gender diversity outside the boundaries of heteronormative structures. At the age of 14, I “came out” as gay. For most of my adult life, I have identified as a lesbian; however, the more I learn and discover of my own identity, I realize she/her pronouns do not accurately define or describe who I know myself to be. The title of woman does not express who I am. As I have shaped the outline of this study, so I have shaped a new Mx. title to my name and given myself more refined and accurate pronouns: she/they. In congruence with the notion of an insider facilitating research that “getting access and developing trust with participants is often more natural if relevant aspects of one’s positionality are similar to those under study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 64).

Throughout my career, I have been an activist and advocate for queer youth. Some of the most profound work I have had the privilege to engage in includes facilitating a GSA club in school, facilitating inclusion trainings for district and school level leaders to address cultural competence, aligning with local and national organizations to inform policy that impacts queer youth, and hosting parent academies to support families as they support their out child. In addition, under the umbrella of my own consulting firm, I have written policy briefs, conducted equity audits and presented my findings at conferences across the country. I have led inclusion trainings for school staff and leaders to expand cultural competence and have collaborated with other queer advocacy organizations to host and moderate listening panels that elevate queer and trans youth in support of systems change.

As an advocate for queer youth, I choose to use my platform to fill the gaps in literature and elevate their voices where previously they have gone unheard. As a non-binary individual, my identity now aligns with being trans. I am highly motivated to leverage my privilege to advocate for trans youth who come after me. As I uncovered layers of my own identity, I considered each individual's unique gender identity and journey to their own truth, understanding each individual has a specific and valid story to tell. Understanding the intricacies of identity and personal evolution despite gender norms and society constructed upon oppressive ideals, I proactively differentiated my experience from those within the broad LGBTQIA community. Each individual has a lived experience shaped by unique events and individuals that contributes to how they show up in the world. I positioned myself alongside my participants in shared identity and in advocacy towards inclusion and liberation within school systems. Because each aspect of my research approach and methods were shaped in part by my positionality, I began here (Milner, 2007). According to Probst and Berenson (2014), "Reflexivity is generally understood as awareness of the influence the researcher has on what is being studied and, simultaneously, of how the research process affects the researcher" (p. 814). As I moved through each phase of my study, I engaged in reflexivity through engaging in a research journaling process; this iterative process kept me grounded in the vision of liberation of trans youth as well as my role in this rigorous, timely study.

Lived Experience

Like many other trans individuals, I was kicked out of my home at the age of 18 because of my gender identity and refusal to embrace the norms of the Christian

fundamentalist, cis-normative ideals under which I had been raised. Separate from the constructs of religious, heteronormative culture, I explored my own identity and freedom in my transgressive identity. While aspects of my positionality remain fixed, my lived experiences are fluid. My own gender identity has shifted from coming out as a lesbian as a youth toward queer then into a beautiful alignment of body and spirit as a non-binary trans individual. I learned quickly to shift from compliance to learning a world of tolerance. As Brown (2000) stated:

Tolerance as a primary political virtue involves a very thin notion of citizenship, a passive notion of co-existence. More importantly, it casts differences as given – not as products of inequality or domination, but as intrinsic and something we have to bear in the social and political world; also, something we would rather not bear—you only tolerate that which you wish you didn’t have to. Tolerance is also part of a complex shell game that liberalism plays with equality and difference – tolerance is extended by the state whenever equality is refused or attenuated. (p.16)

As I examine my individual positionality, I reference social identity theory from the 1970s to demonstrate how my identity might be contrived using categories. I do this with the intent to demonstrate the harm that comes when we create “us” and “others,” and to cultivate an awareness of my own lived experience within these frames. It is essential that I acknowledge my whiteness as a privilege, though one I was unaware of until I was almost 10 years into my career as an educator. I feel inspired by trainings that gave me tools for supporting the “brown boys” but didn’t see the systemic oppression and marginalization that had been a part of the construction of schools leading these innocent youth to prison or early death. I have been made aware of the culpability of whiteness. I have carefully examined gender surveillance and regulation within systems in which I operated. As a researcher and anti-racist intent on lifelong unlearning, I have much more

to explore about the intersections of racism and gender, and how classification of identities has been used to subjugate marginalized populations under colonialism (Keenan, 2022).

As an educator for over 20 years now, I stand in the gap for outliers, whom much like me, may not fit into “traditional” heteronormative systems. Each youth deserves to connect with an adult in their school who reflects themselves and their reality. My lived experience has taught me that we must center and elevate the voices of those who are voiceless, advocate for and empower those in powerless situations to be seen and heard and valued toward inclusion and liberation. We are not free until all are free.

Whether it be language, learning ability, gender, sexual identity, race, ethnicity, label or lack thereof, each person belongs. It is the responsibility of scholars within P–12 educational research to contribute to knowledge production around topics of gender, liberation, and systems of oppression. As Keenan (2022) questions, “In a society where gender is among the most central mechanisms of social categorization within and beyond schools, what are education researchers doing to deepen knowledge about gender?” (p. 311). In this study, I leaned into my positionality and privilege to produce rigorous, ethical scholarship that interrogates cis-normative systems of oppression and seeks liberation for trans youth, the participants of my study.

My positionality may have been that stirring in me as a young girl, when I realized home is not where I belonged, and family didn’t live at home. Victor Frankl (1949) stated, “When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves” (p. 114). From a young gender-bending “tomboy” growing up in the

mountains of Colorado, raised by vehement proponents of the death penalty for homosexuality, to a trans educational leader and research activist, my lived experiences in education and my personal life have certainly informed my research. As a professional, I have served those deemed as outliers or “at risk” in the school system. It was evident early in my career that these very systems were designed to put these individuals at risk. The system is achieving its intended results, with power divested to white cisgender individuals and power stripped from all others. Within the Division of Youth Corrections, I saw many products of failed oppressive systems with intersectional youth. I have invested half my life in youth who do not fit into the traditional systems and now have designed a platform for trans youth to fight for their own inclusion and liberation. It seems to be the greatest contribution I might make.

Impacts on My Research

Because qualitative research is focused upon capturing non-numerical data to understand experiences, it is crucial that I acknowledge the influence of my own individual privilege upon my interviews with trans youth who share my identity. I cannot separate my own identity from the study I conducted. Undoubtedly, my positionality and lived experience played a role in my analysis of the data collected in my study, and therefore, I intentionally employed trustworthiness strategies throughout the research process. The strategies I chose to increase the rigor of my study are member checks, peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, and critical feedback.

There are three primary methods for a researcher to identify their positionality (Savin-Badin & Major, 2013). First, situating oneself with the subject of research.

Second, situating oneself with one's participants. Finally, situating oneself with the research process. A reflexive process results in ethical research. Clarifying my own positionality can be seen as an essential part of this research process (Gary & Holmes, 2020). I crafted several journal prompts that guided my reflexive journaling process, with a consistent focus on the words and essence of my participants' voice and an ongoing awareness of the filter of my own positionality.

Understanding that my own identity situates me in this study as an "insider" (Merton, 1972) impacted the intentional design of member checks, reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and critical feedback cycles with my dissertation chair as well as reflexivity with existing literature from trans scholars. Ontologically, my insider perspective offered an emic account of the trans youth participants whom I chose to advocate for in this study. It was impossible for me to hold "empathetic neutrality" (Ormston et al., 2014), though this seems to be a stance some scholars value in research. I will have my subjectivities, and those I will keep in check through the high ethical standards to which I held dear in this process. I would argue that because I have a deep cellular investment into these youth and their wellbeing that this study may have an even greater impact as I served as a conduit for the voice of those youth who have yet to be empowered to share and lead and disrupt the very same inequities that oppressed and marginalized them in school.

Qualitative Methodology

As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) have expressed, "All qualitative research is interested in how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their

worlds. The primary goal ... is to uncover and interpret these meanings” (p. 25). I was intentional in selecting qualitative methodology to understand the meaning-making that trans youth explore throughout their educational experiences. Qualitative research allowed me to take a deep dive with a few participants, empowering participants to, “voice their unique lived experiences and discuss the personal meaning of a given construct” (Langdrige, 2007, p. 184). Utilizing the exploratory tools of qualitative research, I listened to uncover individual views and experiences as well as observe and learn about trans youth identities. I chose qualitative research because I wanted the participants in my study to share their individual perspectives without constraint. The data I aimed to gather about their lived experiences could not be captured with a closed question quantitative survey. Qualitative methodology aligned with my goals and objectives within this study.

Approach to Inquiry

Phenomenology can be defined as a discipline that “aims to focus on people’s perceptions of the world in which they live in and what it means to them; a focus on people’s lived experience” (Landgridge, 2007, p. 4). Tools of the phenomenological approach give power to individual voices, which enables a deep understanding of the lived experiences shared by participants (Creswell, 2012). Phenomenological research is a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants. This description culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon. This design has strong

philosophical underpinnings and typically involves conducting interviews (Creswell, 2018; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994).

Creswell (2012) asserted the phenomenological approach gives power to individual participant voice. I chose phenomenological methodology for my study. I wanted to understand how trans youth navigate a system that is exclusive and utilize their shared lived experiences to offer recommendations for inclusive policies, practices, and protocols within school systems. This was a qualitative study that employed both phenomenology as the chosen methodology. The broad phenomenological study existed to unveil the resilience and lived experience of trans youth within several secondary public schools.

The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence (Creswell, 2007). I selected hermeneutic phenomenology as my primary approach to inquiry. Scholar Van Manen (1990) introduced hermeneutic phenomenology, with a deep focus on the lived experience and interpreting the texts of life. Within this methodology, Van Manen (1990) shared six research activities: (1) turning to the nature of lived experience; (2) investigating experience as we live it; (3) reflecting on essential themes; (4) the art of writing and re-writing; (5) maintaining a strong and oriented relation to lived experience; and (6) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (pp. 30–34). Phenomenology assisted in understanding the meaning and significance of the shared lived experiences of a marginalized group of individuals, while also appreciating the intricacies of their individual perspectives. A strength of this study is that I gained a rich,

deep understanding or description of the human experience. Findings emerged naturally. There is potential with phenomenology for changes in policy and social response to trans youth that counter current heightened anti-trans sentiment and legislation. A limitation of phenomenology, as with all qualitative research, is that it requires significant amounts of time to gather and analyze data. I responded to committee members questions about the appropriateness of this methodology, and reflected upon that feedback as I moved through my data collection. I found three essences that reverberated through all of my participants' journeys and feel confident that phenomenology is a methodology that fit this study intentions and my own process. Those essences include: (1) adultism; and (2) situational outness; and (3) defiant joy and resistance. These essences were gleaned from core features that cut across the individual narratives of trans youth participants.

Qualitative research enables the researcher to dive deep into the individual and shared lived experiences of participants to learn the essence of their identity as it exists within and challenges heteronormative systems of schooling. This intensive approach to inquiry yielded understanding that will assist with informing best practice at the street level of leadership in schools to forward inclusion for the participants and other subgroups. Giroux recognized the value of writing for broader audiences, noting:

Clearly one does not have to give up being an academic, retreat from rigorous research, or renounce the importance of specialization to address major social issues. I do not think you give up theoretical rigor by writing in a way that addresses major social concerns and is at the same time accessible to wider informed general audiences. (Giroux, 1997, p. 86).

Steps I took to ensure my study was rigorous include ongoing intentional reflexivity and honest communication with participants during this study. My frontloading and

intentional design of a culturally competent and inclusive interview protocol demonstrates the care and attention to detail in this study. Engaging in member checking also ensured that I was soliciting honest feedback about the data I collected and the conclusions I had drawn. I engaged in individual member checking after transcribing each individual interview, once after all interviews were complete and I had captured four themes, and then once again to ensure the three essences I brought forth aligned with their perception of their experiences. All my efforts were informed by historical and emerging trans scholarship that I engaged with on an ongoing basis. I continued to unlearn and learn, being led by those trans scholars who serve as mentors and ancestors in this work and will continue beyond this dissertation in practice. Aligning with respected trans scholars ensures I remained challenged in approaching each process with care and focus on producing a high-quality final product that contributed to scholarship while simultaneously honoring participants.

Research Sample

This study is set in the north suburbs of Denver, Colorado. Youth were recruited from a mid-sized school district that expands along the Rocky Mountains. This school district offers education to approximately 40,000 students, from preschool to twelfth grade. The district has recently established a focus on equity, inviting consultants in to complete an equity audit on systems and structures. What began as a conversation focused primarily on race has extended to a holistic approach on the intersectionality of students. The lens has expanded to view the myriad layers of student identities including race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and beyond. Conversations have begun that

include outliers from all intersections, including both youth and staff who identify along the LGBTQIA spectrum. As an educator in this district for over 10 years, I have observed that there have been no systems or structures of support for queer and trans staff or students outlined in district policy, and no universal inclusion trainings exist that inform best practices directly impacting queer and trans youth. Currently, LGBTQIA inclusive policies and trans inclusive language training is being offered to small, isolated groups of educators and school communities as they are rolled out. It is important to note that systemic change requires much unlearning; we are a community of learners and unlearners. The researcher works within this learning community and has established relationships that enable their ability to recruit and facilitate the study alongside participants with ease, each of whom are enrolled students in high school in this district.

Sampling Strategy

I chose purposeful sampling because, as a qualitative tool, it allowed me to gain a deeper insight into the phenomenon which I was studying. This involved identifying and selecting individuals or groups of individuals that were especially knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2011). Purposeful sampling allowed me to select participants based upon the objectives set out in understanding my phenomenon of interest. My objective was to invest my research into the lives of trans youth. The gender identity of youth within my sampling was aligned with my objectives. Purposeful sampling ensured that I would be facilitating research with intention, elevating the voices of trans youth. My review of existing literature exposed deficit

narratives and a significant underrepresentation of the voices and identities of trans youth.

This school district serves a diverse student body, with an increasingly expansive refugee population, transient families, and students who are undergoing transition and openly identifying along the spectrum of gender identity. The broad range of political and social positions of families represented in this district have increased tension in board rooms as Transgender Guidelines have been rolled out and disputed in board and staff meetings. Study participants were recruited from this county and school district because of the current political and social unrest that has placed trans youth in a most vulnerable position – their bodies and identities up for negotiation by board members, parents, politicians, and administrators. I explicitly chose to focus on this district because of the recent attack on trans students by conservative board members who mock these youth as they speak in support of the Transgender Guidelines. These guidelines were rolled out to support youth, inform teachers of how to support youth, and specify protocols and policies that support and protect trans youth. I have established trust in this queer community of learners and educators, and there is great need.

The queer community in this district has expanded, been identified, and forced to speak out against their erasure and oppression. As a member of this community and in the district where I have grown my roots and career, I was advocating for trans youth with this study. I sent communication regarding the study to community members and families with whom I have worked, including trans youth and their parents/guardians. This included former students, those students who have participated in past youth panels and

GSA. It also included students who had approached me for support over the years in coming out to their families or navigating the school system as they come out and openly identified their individual gender. The participant pool is composed of students who range in age, ethnic background, and gender identity of trans. These youth best knew how to detail the shared lived experience of trans youth within the system. As the researcher, utilizing my inclusion criteria and feedback from my dissertation chair, I determined a maximum of six participants would be selected for interviews for the broad phenomenological study.

I communicated via email to recruit students (see Appendix D). Through past outreach in the community as well as a social media invitation, I gained access to individual email addresses. I shared this communication with active members of the GSA, LGBTQIA affinity groups, and leadership council. I sent recruitment emails to families with whom I was acquainted within the county and the district. Based upon the work I had done with these families and community members, I had access to their email addresses. Professional partners of mine were able to send emails to any students who they supported with gender identity. I included secondary public-school students who openly identify as trans.

Qualitative Methods

Several methods closely align with phenomenology. Some of those include interviews, conversations, participant observation, action research, and focus groups. As Maxwell (2013) advised, “Decisions about research methods depend on the issues you are studying and the specific context of your research, as well as on other components of

your design” (p. 87). I carefully considered the research questions I had designed and what methods would be the best fit. The phenomenon I was investigating was the essence of the shared lived experience of trans youth within secondary public schools. After careful reflection of both methods and the phenomenon in focus, I selected semi-structured interviews through narrative for my study.

I focused my semi-structured interviews upon research questions. The catalyst and rationale for these research questions was the need for research to include the voices of trans youth. While I selected research questions that honor both the phenomenological tradition and more importantly the participants within my study, I was also careful to make sacred space for both open and probing questions, flexing to be responsive to participant responses to explore and capture each of their individual experiences through narrative (Bliss, 2016). Most studies focused on trans youth in schools focus upon the reality of adults, including administrators and teachers or parents (Singh et al., 2014). This fact highlights the controlled narrative that replicates cis-normative values and ideals in research and in schools. Adultism and the power differential that comes along with it leave schools “without processes of disruption or strategies to address a systemic analysis of root causes” (Miller, 2018). This adult-centered research then becomes part of the root causes of systemic incarceration and regulation of gender diverse youth. Elevating only the voice of those in power perpetuates the harm that already lives in the bodies and minds of trans youth. Very little research has been done at the secondary level with minors that elevates the youth voice and empowers them to be an integral part of

needed change. Few empirical studies take the narratives and lived experiences of trans youth in schools to disrupt the systems of oppression and marginalization.

Visibility is central in the structuring of vulnerability and in the politics of resistance of vulnerable populations (Gambetti, 2016). Visibility is a priority with the inclusion of these research questions. By giving trans youth a voice, they become tangible and visible. The research questions prompt us to look resistance in the face and understand why, although it has been problematized, is simply the means which these youth are becoming visible in the system. Trans youth mobilize their vulnerability to resist educational cis-normativity (McBride & Neary, 2021). Additionally, these questions allow trans youth to share their lived experiences to impact change in the system. They are able to mobilize their lived experience to share a deeper understanding of their unique identities and can challenge cis-normative structures and systems that have oppressed them as they navigate school (McBride & Neary, 2021).

Research Design

According to Maxwell (2013), “Your research questions formulate what you want to understand [and] your interview questions are what you ask people to gain that understanding” (p. 101). Informed by my theoretical framework and literature review, I frontloaded the process of developing my interview protocol with thoughtful reflection upon my own lived experience as well as what I knew to be true about those participants with whom I was investing. I intentionally crafted questions that, in alignment with my chosen methodological approach of phenomenology, would allow me to grasp the unique nature of the lived experiences of the individuals with whom I studied alongside. I

reflected on the impact my questions had on the youth and deleted those questions I knew would risk harm. Within the body of the protocol, I layered multiple check-ins so that I was able to stay aware of the emotional toll this process had on the participants. Maxwell (2013) explains the ethical obligation a researcher has to consider impact on participants: “Put yourself in their position and ask how you would feel if someone did to you what you are thinking of doing” (p. 92). Gaining trust and being aware of participants’ perspectives allowed me to glean a greater understanding of what I was trying to study. I designed an interview protocol that allowed for participants to be seen, heard, and valued through the design of questions that honor their unique, authentic selves and make room for them to celebrate themselves. The interview protocol was interactive, with participants selecting the questions that most closely resonated with their lived experience (see Appendix A). I prompted participants to share their individual story in narrative form so that I could capture the full essence of their individual and shared lived experience.

I engaged in one round of semi-structured interviews to examine trans youths’ experiences within their school and with the individuals within that system. The semi-structured interviews were focused upon individual experiences with safety, visibility, and inclusion as well as the gender identity and expression embraced by each youth. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the spring of 2023.

Trans youth from the broad Adams County community were invited to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Six of those were chosen as participants for the broad phenomenological study. I chose this number of participants for my study so that I could

explore their story in depth, gaining much more detail of the complex intersectionality and shared lived experience of these youth.

Semi-structured interviews lasted 45–60 minutes, with extended time given to explaining the purpose of the study, creating norms for participation (e.g., safe space, ability to opt out, speaking for oneself), and reading the Preamble. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a private room within a community organization providing safe spaces and were audio recorded with youths' permission. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis, with the option of having a parent or guardian in the room. None of the youth chose to have their parent or guardian present for the interview. Youth provided their own assent for participation. Parents and guardians signed permission forms for participation. Youth were prompted to use pseudonyms rather than their own name; however, they were allowed to use their preferred name if that differed from their name given at birth; this measure was taken as a way to build trust with participants and to ensure they felt their identity was honored in the interview. One participant specifically asked for the researcher to use their chosen name in the study, and that request has been honored.

Data Collection

Within the framework of phenomenology, I employed a qualitative research tool of interviews to gather data on the lived experiences of my study participants. An integral part of honoring and elevating trans youth voice was allowing each participant the opportunity to share their voice and experience in whatever manner best suits their unique identity. My ultimate desire throughout the data collection process was that

participants felt free to embrace and share their self-determined gender identity, with a commitment as the researcher to strive in my work to create systems also ready to embrace them. I engaged in member checking to ensure that the data I was collecting aligned with the perceptions and intent conveyed by participants (see Appendix F).

Semi-Structured Interviews

I facilitated one round of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews for of 45–60 minutes, both in person at the Anythink Wright Farms library in Thornton, Colorado, and virtually on Zoom. Allowing participants to select their preferred location was a simple act that honored their sacred identity and voice. In-person interviews provided context that a virtual interview may not have captured; it may also have exposed a vulnerability that made participants uncomfortable or exposed. As a researcher committed to data integrity and identity competence, I chose to defer to the requests of each participant on both location and duration. Only one participant chose the virtual option, and their decision was based upon their parent’s schedule and inability to get them to an in-person interview. Participants engaged in open and probing questions and were explicitly given the opportunity to opt out at any time, as described in the assent forms signed through the IRB process. The interviews informed my first set of coding, and member checking was used throughout the study to clarify content and intent with narratives, as a measure to ensure what the researcher captured reflected precisely what the participant had intended.

Data Analysis Procedures

The nature of qualitative research is that of ongoing, continuous reflection and adaptation. The first step in this iterative process was for me to read the interview

transcripts to be analyzed (Emerson et al., 1995). As I listened to and read the transcripts, I took notes. These notes created a body of data that I used to begin thinking about categories. I conducted this qualitative analysis using the program Nvivo. During my open coding, I developed codes in my codebook. After open coding, I engaged in axial coding, developing the categories which then informed my themes. Finally, I engaged in selective coding, focused upon “identity,” “school experiences,” “inclusion,” and “recommendations.” Once I coded the data, I organized codes into categories, developed themes, and prepared my findings to report out. As I developed themes, I analyzed my reflexive journal notes (see Appendix E) and categories of codes, which culminated in a handful of broad themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My themes directed my findings, as shared in Chapter 5. I engaged each participant in one round of semi-structured interviews to ensure I was able to capture the essence of the shared lived experiences of trans youth. Engaging in ongoing thematic analysis, I reviewed and refined my themes. I utilized a codebook to track these themes and organized my themes across a thematic map. All of these steps ensured I captured the most coherent and accurate story about my participants’ lived experiences.

In addition, I utilized the six research activities Van Manen outlines in hermeneutic phenomenology. Data analysis began immediately following the initial semi-structured interview. After the conclusion of each interview, I created a journal entry and took time to review my interview notes. I transcribed interviews by hand within 24 hours of the interview conclusion to maintain structured routines in process and to

ensure validity of all data collected and analyzed. I staggered interviews to allow time to effectively transcribe interviews one at a time.

I analyzed the data using line by line coding, then by themed coding, and comparison methods (Charmaz, 2014). Data was examined and inquiry refined through observations of the researcher during this process. I examined initial codes with rigor in subsequent coding to uncover most important details. I then created categories, or big buckets, of themes through theoretical sampling, which ensured that I could delve deeper into each theme for meaning, connection and relevance.

I employed inductive coding during my data analysis of semi-structured interviews. This allowed me to explore potential and emergent themes as I went through the data analysis process. I then used deductive coding to analyze the initial themes. These tools of data collection informed the study and findings used to support current leaders and policy at the district level, a strategy that will cultivate ethical, well-informed leaders with a vision for challenging old, inequitable systems and simultaneously creating new systems that include and liberate all youth (Miller, 2018).

Trustworthiness Strategies

As Maxwell (2013) notes, “You will need to learn what your participants’ perceptions and understanding are of you and your research in order to develop useful and ethically appropriate relationships with them” (p. 93). Listening to participants was only one aspect of the interview. Restating what I thought I heard was essential in allowing participants to clarify, refine and explain their words. My first strategy to ensure trustworthiness was member checking, to be used with participants’ post-interview.

Member checking allowed me to systematically solicit feedback from participants about the data I had gathered and conclusions I had drawn to ensure they aligned with the participants' intent.

The second trustworthiness strategy I employed is triangulation, used in collection of data through interviews and informal observations during our time together. According to Maxwell (2013), triangulation is “collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods” (p. 128). I continuously sought to maintain a keen awareness of how my lens may shape not only the data but also its interpretation in this study. In addition to maintaining an awareness of the impact of my lens through a diverse method set, triangulation also supported my credibility by providing a more holistic and complete view of the phenomenon I was studying.

The third and final trustworthiness strategy I used is peer debriefing, used with a content expert on my dissertation committee upon conclusion of data collection in interviews (see Appendix G).

Ethical Considerations and Validity

I submitted an IRB application for human subject research. Because I was working with minors, I anticipated going through the full Board review and was required to do so. Establishing myself as a researcher with high ethical standards was a priority as I took this initial dive into the world of scholarship. Each step of my process came with deep consideration for ethical interactions with participants, respect and awareness of the current political context and landscape of trans bodies and identities, as well as potential impact of the study upon both research and individual participants. I was working with

minors independent from a school district and had my project reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Denver. One of the foundational aspects of my qualitative study was informed consent (see Appendix B). Through the formal IRB full review, my interview protocols and all permission, consent, and assent forms (see Appendix C) were checked to ensure potential participants were aware of the study purpose and their contribution to it.

Confidentiality and Consent

One way I established myself as a researcher with high ethical standards was through privacy, confidentiality, and consent. Confidentiality and anonymity were two tools employed in this research to both protect participants and minimize their risk. Individual names were not used in materials including transcription. I provided all participants with pseudonyms, excluding the one participant who preferred to have their chosen name reflected in the study. I obtained consent by establishing communication and relationship with families. I also utilized written consent forms for guardians/parents to sign. I maintained confidentiality by ensuring the one virtual participant was renamed with a pseudonym at the start of my study. I also was the only individual with access to the data aside from my Chair. All data was held in a locked iCloud account.

In addition to all these steps to ensure high ethical standards throughout the process of this study, I engaged in trustworthiness strategies to evaluate the accuracy of my findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). One strategy I included was self-reflection through journaling regarding my positionality throughout the research process (see Appendix E). Second, I embedded peer review of my analysis and findings with esteemed dissertation

committee members, my dissertation chair, and respected trans scholars with whom I had ongoing relationship. I engaged in an iterative process of including their feedback in my reflection and revision of the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mullet, 2018). Intentional planning and protocols ensured both transparency and trustworthiness of my research, and challenged me to engage in ethical and truthful ways with my participants and their lived experiences. I collaborated with participants by actively involving them in the research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through member checking and reflexive journaling, I engaged in iterative process of refining to clearly represent and elevate youth voice in my study. At a time when fear-based, deficit narratives persist, elevating the truth is a revolutionary act.

Chapter Summary

The phenomenologist strives to invoke a feeling of understanding the essence of the lived experience of the participant with their readers (Creswell, 2013), yet empathy without action can easily be construed as apathy. Research has been complicit in contributing to the misunderstanding of gender (Keenan, 2022). Academic scholarship contributes little more than a reproduction of stories of oppression in its own voice (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Rigorous, ethical scholarship requires a commitment to design methodologies that, “avoid reinforcing the structures and epistemologies that have done harm to trans people” (Keenan, 2022, p. 307). As we investigate the ways in which trans youth are marginalized, excluded, victimized, and erased from schools, we must examine the impact of empowering youth to elevate them towards their inclusion and liberation within the public school system. Educational leaders must leverage their power and

platform to create inclusive systems and structures for trans youth, bolstered by equity profiles and strategic action plans supported by accountability measures. Rather than schools serving as a microcosm of societal marginalization based upon the gender binary and pathologization of identities, schools must stand in opposition to the notion that school is for all students but not each student. Just as a youth with disabilities is welcome into a system, with accommodations for support, so must trans youth be intentionally included within the daily routines and structures toward an equitable education. Schools must take the lead in liberating each youth and empowering each student to live to their own best potential with the chosen identity of their preference and without exception or exclusion.

In alignment with Creswell (2007), I considered the following questions. Who owns the story? Who can tell it? Who can interpret it? In this chapter, I have reviewed the community in which the study was facilitated, how and why participants were chosen, as well as identified my chosen methodology with context provided that explicates why the chosen methodology aligned with my research goals. I have shared ethical considerations and processes for data collection and analysis. I have communicated my researcher positionality, connection with the trans community, and the purpose for this specific study. In the next chapter, I explore my findings and discuss results.

Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this research was to understand the layered essences of the phenomenon of what it is like to be an “out” trans youth in secondary public schools and to elevate youth voices toward leadership actions that ensure trans-inclusion and liberation in schools. After conducting semi-structured interviews with youth participants, I analyzed the data described in chapter three. This chapter presents the findings to address the following research questions for the study: (1) What is it like to be an “out” trans youth in a secondary public school; (2) What are the shared lived experiences of trans youth within the public school system; and (3) How can the shared lived experiences of trans youth inform policy and practice toward trans inclusion and liberation? This chapter presents the themes that emerged from the participants’ reflections on their journeys. Phenomenological data analysis aimed to describe themes in a way that provides resonance for individuals who may have shared particular experiences. To understand the layered essences of the lived experiences of trans youth in schools, the researcher presented the converging themes of the participants’ experiences, while highlighting the convergent and divergent experiences within. To provide a rich description of themes, many participant extracts were included to highlight the complexity and interconnectedness of the themes and supporting categories.

After presenting participant journeys, I share the four themes of my findings. These four themes highlighted the participants' individual and shared experiences: (1) gender identity: transition Journey and coming out; (2) navigating geography and safety and the impact of school culture; (3) creating belonging through a coalition of community and friendship; and (4) youth lessons learned and recommendations. Each theme has categories pertinent to organizing the data. Horizontalization enabled me to find themes present or common across the lived experience of participants and to uncover the important aspects and characteristics of the phenomenon, the essence(s). In the following section, I am pleased to share their journeys.

Max's Journey

Max just turned 15. Max identifies as trans non-binary and uses they/them pronouns. They describe their family as "not traditional." Max was born to their cisgender father and lesbian mother and was raised from childhood with these parents and a stepmother. Max has a half sibling who is 8 years old, and who they share about half of each week with at their mom's home. Max chuckled as they told me about sitting their parents down to tell them "the news," sharing that their mom and dad were awkward and confused. They followed that up by sharing that their parents have been fully supportive of their name change, getting access to binders, and visiting the True Clinic for support with gender-affirming care.

Max attended a gifted and talented public school through middle school and now attends a large public high school near both of their parents' homes in a more conservative, almost rural, suburb of Denver. Max began to play with and explore their

identity at home and in school during seventh grade and was open with their preferred pronouns and name change by eighth grade. They mentioned that in a small community, it was much easier to engage in activities and feel supported by their teachers and peers. Max considers themselves an artist and a connoisseur of Dungeons and Dragons. In middle school, they were part of an after-school club that meet weekly to play the game. Max noted that most of their friends who were in the club were also friends who, like them, were exploring their gender expressions and identities. Max explained:

I'm not sure if it's because we are already outside the norm with our brains and interests, but being in the GT school with all these friends made being out easy and comfortable. We grew up together. We are all kinda just figuring it out and making room for each other along the way.

One of the greatest joys for Max has been their small group of tight-knit friends since elementary school: "We are all super smart and kind and funny. It's the best kind of little family to have outside of my own family." Max indicates these relationships have been foundational in their gender identity journey.

Max is proud that they are in ninth grade but taking an eleventh-grade math class. They excel academically despite not feeling connected to anyone other than a couple of friends in high school. They just earned their driver's permit and are paid to care for their younger sibling in the summer. They are currently going through certification for babysitting to begin earning money with a summer job. Max is a self-proclaimed introvert who enjoys being at home in their room playing with their two cats or being online. When asked why they agreed to be a part of the study, Max shared,

I guess I'm pretty lucky to have parents and friends who support me, but I would hope my story helps other trans kids feel safe and maybe understand how it's actually more safe to be out. The most dangerous thing to do is to hide and pretend you aren't you.

Max described a moment when they were on vacation with their father in Florida (an irony not lost on them) and had an "awakening." They described this awakening as full-body knowing to my core that I was so much more than just a girl, that my body and life had more purpose and expansive boundaries than the labels people had put on me until then.

While Max is the only participant who uses the term "awakening," most participants describe various phases of self-awareness and the realization that they no longer need to be constrained by societal norms. When asked about their experience with sharing his identity with their parents, Max mentioned that their mom is queer and that the gender binary is not an issue in their home. "One thing is that I was never sheltered from LGBTQ stuff. I have a lesbian mom, and was pretty sure I wasn't cisgender by like sixth grade, when I would have been 12." They shared that having a parent who is queer made it feel much simpler and safer to come out as non-binary. They also shared that they think their parents knew long before their eighth grade year when they decided to sit them down and talk about their identity. Max elaborated on their experience of sitting their parents down to share their non-binary identity:

My dad had been at my mom's house to pick me up one Tuesday night, and I was randomly like, we need to sit down, so I can talk to you about something. I drop

the news on them. And instead of them being a particular way, they were both really confused. Not hostile. ‘Why are you doing this now?’ ‘What is happening here?’ It was awkward and vulnerable.

Max indicated that their parents seemed to not think a big announcement was necessary, but that they had already shared their gender expression which served to inform them. After hearing Max formally declare their newfound identity and label, Max’s mother began to take action to connect them with resources in the community. Max’s experiences indicate that having a family member who is queer could help accelerate and facilitate open communication.

Max shared their feelings of existing “in between.” They talked about this middle space somewhere between a masculine and feminine identity. As the one trans non-binary participant, Max has distinct experiences with this middle space. They shared, “If I could describe the perfect version of my body, it would be neutral, and that’s kinda how I think of myself in my mind. I’m in between.” This unique lived experience within this panel of participants is important to share, and a valuable glance into the reality of being in between yet outside the boundaries of cis-normative expectations of gender.

Lilly’s Journey

Lilly is 17 years old. Lilly identifies as a trans woman and uses she/her pronouns. Lilly describes her situation as “unusual” because she is only out to one of her parents and is not open with her gender identity and expression at her part-time tech ed classes. Lilly is an only child and spends most of her time alone because her parents both work and consider her mostly independent. With the one parent who knows her gender

identity, Lilly has full support. This parent encouraged her to participate in this study and share her experiences. That parent has been proactive in helping Lilly with her transition journey. Lilly shared, “We scheduled a consultation in a couple months so I can begin taking HRT.” Yet, Lilly’s other parent refuses to offer support or acceptance, “It’s sometimes frustrating. If I were to go by my chosen name with him, it would create problems.” Lilly shared that her other parent is not oblivious but “just pretends that nothing is happening.” When Lilly wore a skirt to class one day, neither parent mentioned anything about it. She remembers feeling invisible but relieved that they would not tell her to change or give her a hard time. Lilly has a trans boyfriend, who is her primary source of support and friendship. Lilly and her boyfriend attend the career and tech school together, though Lilly is enrolled in construction and auto mechanics while her boyfriend is enrolled in other courses. She met her boyfriend at school, and he was the first person she came out to in eleventh grade. Lilly shared that her transition is just beginning, and she is thinking about a medical transition when she turns eighteen: “I think I’ll be on my own then, so it won’t be a big deal. I really just don’t match internally and externally. I think I’d be happier if I could have surgery and be myself.” Lilly has met resistance at home and harassment in school and her community. She considers her superpower to be self-confidence, stating, “I’ve always known my value, that I matter, and that I could make a difference for younger kids.” She described her experience as “a mixed bag,” sharing that she has the privilege of being white and presenting as male yet filled with shame as a younger child and blatant acts of oppression from peers in school. “I’m not really surprised trans women are murdered,” she noted, “We seem like the

biggest threat to ignorant, uneducated people.” When asked to share what a seventeen-year-old should be thinking about, Lilly said, “Prom. Graduation. Where I’m taking my boyfriend on our next date.” She then shared that she has been working for four months to save enough money to buy tickets for her and her boyfriend to see their favorite band this summer.

Tony’s Journey

Tony is 17 years old. He identifies as a trans man and uses he/him pronouns. Tony comes from a large Catholic family steeped in both Latinx and Native American traditions. He has two siblings; his parents and grandmother live with them. Tony shared that the one supportive person in his family regarding his gender identity journey is his grandmother. She is the person who actively supports Tony in finding clothes that match his desired gender expression and the one family member who proactively gives Tony sentiments of love and support. By contrast, Tony’s mom is silently supportive, always allowing Tony to explore his identity, while Tony’s dad consistently resists and attempts to invalidate Tony’s gender identity: “My dad is always trying to set me up on dates with boys and tells me he doesn’t believe in gay. He always tells me to wear a dress or act like a lady. It’s mostly because of his religion.”

Tony navigates resistance and rejection from his parents. Tony shared that his family has a dirty little secret that no one outside their immediate family is allowed to know. He followed that by saying, “I am a secret too.” Tony’s perception is that his existence as a trans man has been viewed as equal to his father’s extra-marital affairs. Tony was born to a Catholic family who does not, in his own words, “believe in gay

people.” He explains his grief as a trans man when his father invalidates his identity with comments such as, “You are a lady; trans is wrong.” Tony explained:

My dad says that if you’re born a woman, you’re a woman for the rest of your life. My parents don’t believe in the same sex. Most of them got married at 14–17, so you feel like those same expectations are in place for you. He tells me, ‘Oh, look at this guy; he’s cute,’ He pushes me to be attracted to men.

While Tony’s father refuses to accept his identity, Tony’s mother is a hesitant supporter. Tony explained, “My mom tells me I’m not sure yet. That this is just a phase, and I will grow out of it.” Tony’s experiences indicated that cultural and religious forces play into how their families accept or reject participants.

Tony does not subscribe to his father’s or family’s Catholic religion. He prefers to study Buddhism and enjoys learning about how there is always a reason for suffering. Tony shares a self-awareness and confidence that his journey has led him here to be a mentor and example for younger trans kids. He speaks clearly about wanting to help them learn how to share their identity safely with trusted friends, how to access resources, and how to keep a positive outlook even when one experiences harassment or oppression in school:

I joined the GSA at my school so I could help younger trans kids. The GSA is like the family I never had. I think it’s important to surround yourself with people who value you, even if they don’t understand everything.

Tony enjoys going to concerts and is in training to be a firefighter through a career and tech education program in his school district. He also attends an online school,

where he “feels safe to be myself and meet other kids like me. The online school is where a lot of us go because in person school isn’t safe.” Tony understands that his voice is important in school and in the GSA. He shares feeling aware at a young age that he wasn’t aligned with his gender assigned at birth. As a young child, he remembers dressing like a boy and feeling “home.” While Tony has not taken any steps toward medical transition, he does have big plans for his future. He wants to have children and travel. Tony knows that his future includes finishing school, becoming a firefighter, and growing a family with his partner. He thinks pursuing his career first is important since he does not want to be like his mom and marry at a young age and never be able to explore the world. His biggest dream is that “the world will someday embrace people like me because I’m awesome, and I have so much to offer.”

Zaiden’s Journey

Zaiden is 14 years old. He identifies as a trans man and uses he/him pronouns. He also shared that he once heard someone say their pronouns had not been created yet, and that resonated with him. Zane lives with his mom and is an only child. He was born and raised in rural, upstate New York. He transferred from a rural to an urban school and could share the vast difference in perceptions and reception to his gender identity. He described his decision not to come out to his extended family because they had conservative ideas about the roles of women and men in society. Zaiden shared that coming to a larger, urban school gave him a fresh start where he could dress how he wanted and not feel like “a complete outcast.”

He described his family and other community members as uneducated and ignorant. They moved to Colorado last year because his mom wanted him to grow up in a more inclusive and safe space than he had come out in. In rural New York, with family and peers, Zaiden experienced much resistance to his gender identity and expression. Zaiden shared that the only person wholly accepting of his trans identity is his mother and that she has gone “out of her way to ensure I can grow up understanding that I’m not broken or wrong for who I am.” Coming to Colorado and enrolling in a public school here has greatly improved Zaiden’s positive experiences with being out with peers and teachers in school.

Zaiden expressed dual worry about peers directing comments to him and teachers not protecting him:

I fear that certainly those kids who already could potentially not be supportive of the idea of me, could come up and like know me from a class or something, and could actually speak their mind about what they think about me without having the teachers’ intervention.

When probed for an example of his experience with verbal harassment, Zaiden elaborated, “Back in middle school, when I was starting to express more of who I was well, I was called a few names. Things I wouldn’t want to say or explain currently. But I have been called names and harassed a few times.” Zaiden concludes, “But other than that, it’s not too big of an issue. It’s just the general sense of worry.” Imagine what it must feel like for harassment to be a small issue for youth navigating school. What, then, would be the large concerns? Is there anything more important than safety?

Zaiden is a self-proclaimed athlete. He likes baseball and is getting permission to play on the boys' baseball team with his school. What sounds like a simple process involves Zaiden attending the monthly school board meetings and speaking on his behalf for the policy to change in the district to allow youth to play on any gendered team. He is hopeful that he will be able to play this spring season, but shared, "I know I'm also fighting for other kids, not just me. If I can help get the rules changed, many other kids might get to also play sports without such a big fight." Zaiden gives his mother high praise for taking him to each of these meetings and for supporting him with any goal he sets for himself. She has filled out paperwork to have his name legally changed and his pronouns normalized in his school. He feels that the school he is in now is mostly supportive and inclusive of trans youth and has gotten involved with his GSA. He claims that the two staff sponsors, who are a married lesbian couple, have made the GSA feel like a "really close group of friends."

Zaiden attends the GSA every week and is participating in his school's "Day of Silence" to honor the LGBTQIA community members in their school. Zaiden also enjoys going to the library, reading the latest mystery he can find, and playing Dungeons and Dragons with his best friend from back home in New York. This friend is the one person Zaiden first came out to and has proven to be a solid friend throughout Zaiden's gender identity journey. Something that Zaiden feels is special about his story is that he has played with or tried on several different identities along the way. He has identified as non-binary, queer, and now as a trans man. He feels this identity aligns the most with how he perceives himself internally. When asked what his greatest hope is for the future,

Zaiden commented, “I want to live a long and happy life. A lot of that has to do with other people affirming me, but it also has to do with me accepting myself.”

Alex’s Journey

Alex is 17 years old. He identifies as a trans man and uses he/him pronouns. Alex is an only child and splits time between his father and mother, as he has since he was young. Alex was age 7 when his parents divorced. He shares that his father is supportive in a quiet way but that his mom is the one who is “an unashamed and super loud supporter.” Alex works a part-time job and has a boyfriend who identifies as trans as well. Alex spends most of his free time with his boyfriend or mom. While religion does not play a huge part in his life, he sometimes attends church with his mom to support her. Alex values supporting his mom. She is an addict who has been clean for several years, and he understands that the family is all better off when she has support and community. Alex stepping into a space where he may find resistance or meet scrutiny for his identity is a sacrifice he is willing to provide support for his mom.

Alex used to attend a large public high school near his home, but he encountered what he called, “prolonged torment and harassment with no support from adults in power.” This led his mom to enroll him in a smaller high school closer to his dad’s house that is much more inclusive of queer youth and seems to fit his academic needs better. “I’m not a great student. I have attention issues, so small classes are better for me. I need a lot of academic support, and I can get that at my new school.” Alex hopes to graduate next year and is already taking concurrent college courses to expedite his goal of becoming a nurse. Alex’s greatest goal is to become a nurse so he can invest in gender-

affirming care for trans youth and volunteer with organizations that support trans and queer individuals.

Alex has an assured sense of self and carries himself with confidence. When asked what one of his greatest challenges was with his gender expression, he explained

Sometimes people think I'm a lesbian. I have a smaller body, and I was born a girl. I think sometimes people don't understand that we are more than sexual parts. Me being trans is more about my brain and my body matching, not so much who I want to be attracted to or have sex with.

Alex knows it is not his job to teach adults, but he does think he knows how to say things so people can understand: "Whether I like it or not, I'm a leader. People listen to me. So, it makes sense for me to be a part of this study, and for me to help other trans kids come out to their families or friends." When asked what his greatest quality was, Alex simply stated, "joy."

Benito's Journey

Benito is 13 years old. He identifies as a trans male and uses pronouns he/him and they/them. Benito lives with his mother and father and attends an online public school.

When asked why he is enrolled in an online school, Benito explained,

In person isn't safe for someone like me. I am trans, and I began my transition early, so instead of dealing with people and getting harassed, I just do school from home. I do get to do in-person activities which is fun.

Benito is enrolled in a school designed specifically for youth like himself who do not feel safe in in-person school buildings.

Benito explains what full support looks like from his parent. With a smile, he exclaims, “My mom helped me get binders and haircuts.” In response to the question about where he was in his transition journey, Benito shared:

I guess me transitioning socially is like coming out. I already did that. And I have been taking T (testosterone) and a medication that will stop my period. My mom is pretty supportive on that. She’s still wanting me to think through that obviously. But I think my dad is wanting me to wait until I’m an adult.

Benito’s mom is his greatest supporter. She is the one he first came out to and the person who takes him to the True Clinic for his gender-affirming care. Benito takes meds that stop his period and will begin hormone replacement therapy (HRT) when he turns 14. His dad prefers he waits until he is 18 but will not stop Benito from pursuing what he wants to feel fully himself. As Benito explained, “I got really lucky. My parents both want me to be me and no one else. They sometimes are uncomfortable but always support me.” His mom has also helped him get access to binders, which has helped Benito feel more confident with his gender expression. When asked what the biggest challenge in his gender identity journey has been, Benito stated, “I think trying to figure out how I wanted to identify. First, I was a demi boy, then kinda played with other things and finally landed on trans man. It took me a while, but that feels good now.”

Benito often participates in his school’s GSA and has made several friends in that community. He also loves music and does karaoke every month. He noted, “I’m an old soul. So I’m not really tortured like some kids. I do what makes me happy and don’t really worry about anything else.” Benito credits his mom with his powerful sense of self

and confidence, expressing, “She is the person who has made the biggest impact on my life.” One important lesson that Benito is learning is that it is not his job to educate adults, but rather it is his job to be a kid: “I have my whole adult life to do adult things, but for now I’m just being a kid.” Benito thanks his parents for raising him to be his authentic self, even if other people do not understand or appreciate the nuances of his expression and identity. Benito’s hope for schools is that the adults get educated on being inclusive and kind, learning from other adults, not the trans kids.

These youth participants speak to the challenges and joys of being fully themselves. Their voices demonstrate their assets and unique personalities and celebrate them as the self-determined, audacious humans they are. These collective participant journeys inform four broad themes, which will be discussed below.

Theme 1: Gender Identity Transition Process

This first theme centers the participants’ narratives on their gender identity journey and transition process. This theme was supported by the following categories: self-concept and self-determination, questioning self: value and belonging, and exploratory identity. This includes how they played with and explored gender identities, experienced awakenings and a growing awareness of trans possibilities outside the binary, and used language to describe their gender. Participants elaborated upon their journey timeline, specific moments and events that shaped their experience, and their process of exploring gender. Almost all participants addressed an early understanding of binary expectations thrust upon them and their desire to support other younger trans kids due to their own experiences. Every participant shares a moment of self-acceptance

rooted in a deep relationship with oneself and trusted individuals close to them. All participants share their journey about a joyful, arduous development and the necessity of opting out of environments where their growth and trans joy are stifled. Participants contextualize their experiences in geography, current politics, and family dynamics. Each participant's journey holds deep, rich perspectives on how family impacts gender identity and development.

Participant journeys varied, their experiences ranged widely, and their reasons for choosing who and when to come out to (or not) were all deeply personal and complex. All participants shared that they are happy to be out in the safe spaces of their individual lives. As Zane noted, "Not everyone will accept you, but it is honestly better to be out because there are people who will support you, and you need to give them a chance if you feel it is safe." Zane's sentiment is akin to Lilly's advice to come out to the people you trust, "Do it, but be careful who you do it with." Max extends this caution by saying, "People are not going to go out of their way to study something that they've already decided they don't agree with outside of school."

Participants each shared their unique family dynamics. Those participants who experience exclusion and resistance at home seem to approach adult relationships and school cautiously. Tony and Lilly shared their hesitation to engage with students outside the GSA because they had learned that "only the queer community is safe for us." With a resistant father and a hesitantly supportive mother, Tony described his desire to "just do my own thing and not worry about what people think." When asked to elaborate on how coming out to his parents impacted his school interactions, Tony said, "If my own family

won't accept me, why do I think complete strangers will?" Lilly shared a similar sentiment connecting her transition journey with her outness at school, "I am a trans woman. I'm not going around looking for people to like me or understand." She then stated, "I mean, it would be cool for kids not to be jerks, but if adults are, that makes sense to me." Both participants linked adult behaviors with expectations for student behaviors and resistance to their identity in school.

Those participants who experience full support and curiosity from family at home, especially parents, engage with school and relationships in a more vulnerable and open manner, making space for trust, support, and inclusion. Zaiden, Benito, and Alex shared a desire to "make friends" and "feel like we belong" at school. The participants shared ideas of "looking for people to see me and accept me." Zaiden shared his idea that it really is up to each trans student to determine how comfortable they are in their skin and then interact with others at school as they do belong, noting, "I belong here. This is my school."

Benito shared similar sentiments in a nonchalant and calm demeanor saying:

The people most important to me accept and support me. Everyone else is just not my concern. I go to school to learn not to try to fit in. You know what? I don't want to fit in. I just want to be me.

This confidence at age 13 shows the power of parental support and acceptance. Similarly, Alex described his relationship with his mom as the "most influential relationship" in his life and one that set the tone for how he interacts with other people at work and school: "I don't put my head down. I am confident and act like it. It wasn't always this way, but my

mom taught me that what other people say or think isn't important. It's my own self-worth that matters." All three participants acknowledged the value of having support at home and could understand and share how the love and support they received initially at home was the foundation for how they "walked through the world." The first category within this theme is the participants' self-concept and self-determination.

Self-Concept and Self-Determination

Within the theme of gender identity journey, I explored the participants' perceptions of self at various points in their journey, offering explicit examples of their self-determination flexed in response to cis norms and societal expectations. Participants shared what it was like to navigate the world with their gender identities, racial and ethnic identities, religious and spiritual identities, and their sexualities with me. These reflections included how participants experienced different forms of power, privilege, and oppression.

Tony describes his gender expression as "more feminine some days, but more masculine other days." This explanation was a shared experience with several participants. Max mentioned being in an "in-between space," dressing more masculine yet understanding and accepting the feminine parts of their personality. Benito was one participant who shared that their expression was consistent, leaning toward the trans masc identity he embraced. Lilly, the participant who identifies as a trans woman referred to "playing with her feminine side." Lilly discussed wearing skirts to school and trying out makeup when no one was home. Yet Lilly mentioned, "I am confident being in my construction class with other cisgender men and being myself to some extent." A second

category within this first theme is the participants' questioning themselves, their value, and where they belong.

Questioning Self, Value, and Belonging

Participants each shared moments where they questioned their value. Alex mentioned, "You know when you don't belong in school, you might start to think you aren't valuable to that community. I have wondered if I was crazy or if I was being too needy, but I realized I do belong. Damnit." This frustration and sentiment were clear with several participants who shared that they feel society, adults, and schools are the reason they second guess themselves. Benito shared, "I just have to decide every day that I belong here and deserve all the things the other kids have." Participants shared a desire not only to belong but also to help others realize it. "I want to help other people understand what it means to be me so they can see how awesome I am, and then maybe they'll get it." What seemed to resonate with all participants was the habituation of questioning. That same questioning that critiques school policies and adults' responses to their shared identity and expression seems to be the same kind of questioning and self-assessment they participate in. Lilly confidently asserted, "I'm beautiful as I am. I belong in all the spaces where people think I don't. My whole value doesn't depend on someone seeing it, but just me. I have to see it."

Exploratory Identity

The final category within this theme is the participants' exploratory identity. Participants shared how they played with, explored, and navigated their shifting identities. Zaiden shared:

The biggest step was coming out as non-binary, and trying that out because it was how I felt, and because I don't fit into the female gender specifics and I also don't fit into the male ones entirely. So, now I'm kind of in this in-between at that point. I felt like I'd do research and figure out what it actually means. For a short time, I was going around as gender fluid as well, because I kind of wanted some people to think that I was masculine in some sort of way.

Zaiden shared that in GSA, students were given access to resources that helped inform his research. The trust built with the leaders of his GSA empowered him to feel comfortable in this research endeavor. Similarly, Alex described a questioning and trying on of identities:

I think I was questioning for a bit who I was and what I identified as. But now I feel like because I've had all these experiences, and I've tried these different expressions, that I feel like identifying as trans. It's the best for who I really am. Thus, as youth explore and play with their individual identity and expression, they find their truth and ease into their self-concept.

Theme 2: Navigating Geography, Safety, and the Impact of School Culture

The second theme explores participants' nuanced experiences with geography, safety, and the impact of school culture. This theme was supported by the following categories: local legislation, safe and unsafe spaces in school, the impact of school culture, and the need for explicit support from adults in power. Participants were, in part, able to identify the impact of legislation on their bodies and experiences. One participant shared his experience within and without the state of Colorado, identifying stark

differences in freedoms and challenges with his gender identity and expression.

Participants shared the geography of their schools and how their experience was shaped by both safe and unsafe spaces in the school. Lastly, participants shared how geography impacts access to support and resources, a crucial aspect of their gender identity journey.

Local Legislation

The first category within this second theme is the participants' awareness of and engagement in local legislation. Zaiden, Max, and Alex shared an understanding that Colorado youth have support and safety in legislation. Max shared that he and his parents proactively discuss the news, politics, and the growing anti-trans legislation. While Benito is the youngest participant, he has undergone the most significant medical transition. He shared his experience with the True Clinic, which provides gender-affirming health care for trans youth, all that is possible because of the progressive legislation in the state. All three participants shared some level of engagement in student government and a personal interest in current events. In contrast, other participants did not link their experiences to broader legislation. Max connected their experience to the political climate by sharing:

45 ruined it for everyone. Now people hate so loud, and it's kinda normal to see people fighting our existence. Honestly, when I watched him get elected, I cried. I knew we were going to be in trouble. I didn't realize how much he would let people hate us.

Max and other participants expressed an awareness of how the political climate included sentiments of fear and ignorance of trans bodies. Here Max illustrates just how in tune with anti-trans rhetoric these participants are as they navigate their youth.

Zaiden is the one participant who has attended school outside of Colorado. “I feel like Colorado is a lot more supportive of who I want to be, more than back out in the countryside in New York where people like my family have strong conservative ideas.” Participants other than Zaiden and Max did not mention a knowledge of or a familiarity with the politics of the body and the legislation in place that would erase and silence them. Max shared, “While I know stupid politicians are making stupid rules about my existence, I don’t really feel the impact of the rules at school. I know it’s happening, but I’m kind of in a bubble.” Other participants had little to say when asked about legislation and their responses. The resounding notion of the remaining participants was that “it doesn’t impact me much.”

Safe and Unsafe Spaces in School

The second category within this theme is to capture the participants shared stories of navigating safety within the physical school building. They shared feelings of anxiety and experiences of harassment and delineated which spaces in the school were safe and which were dangerous. Every participant confirmed that school hallways and the cafeteria are the most unsafe places in the school for trans kids. There was a resounding theme of safety among participants in the presence of some teachers. Youth described the pockets of safety and inclusion created by teachers. Zaiden shared:

I think the safest I feel is with my teachers. I think that in lunchtime I don't feel safe, but when I am in regular classes, I can actually express who I want to be. I feel a general sense of wellbeing.

Alex affirmed this sense of support and safety with his teachers, saying, "I feel that even though they [teachers] have authority over me, I feel like they don't abuse it, even if they have the opportunity to. They won't. I feel that they actually help me to kind of understand what I need and what I want."

All participants who identified as trans males spoke to the conundrum of gender-neutral restrooms. Zaiden shared, "You can go in any bathroom you want in my school, but the boys would mess me up if I went in their bathroom." He proceeded, "My bathroom." There is this question of ownership of space that several participants eluded to. Max shared a similar sentiment: if they were to use the boy's bathroom, they would not be safe because "you know, teenage boy behavior." Additionally, Benito and Tony reported that their schools had gender-neutral restrooms, but there was only one in the front of the school, far from their classrooms. "If I'm going to use the bathroom, I'm going to be late to school," Tony shared.

Two participants identified gym class as an unsafe space. Max illustrated this: "I have gym class with a boy who has harassed me on multiple occasions. He takes any opportunity to harass me. He's cat called me, but kinda cooled off now. As long as I keep my distance, I'm fine." Contextualizing these remarks further, Max expanded those male teachers, such as the gym teacher, are disconnected from the harm created for students in gym class.

Alex described the climate of the hallways in his school, “I will be walking through the hallway during passing period, and there will be a bunch of people in the hallways. I’m just here and someone will call me the ‘F slur.’” When asked to clarify which word that was, Alex responded, “Faggot. Fucking Faggot. You know, either version.” Other participants mirrored these experiences and spoke to the normalization of harassment primarily by students in school. One participant described his unique experience attending an online school. Benito is one student who has transferred from in-person school to an online school because he did not feel safe in his body at his home high school. While he encountered harassment and physical danger in person, Benito stated, “I don’t think I would say I feel unsafe anywhere at school when we come in person.” He elaborated by describing why he feels that conditions in his new school are safer and better for the mental health of trans students, “I get to choose who has access to me and where I go. I can make friends online in class and then see them in person. I have an entire group of friends who make me feel safe.” Participants shared the spaces where they found the most allyship, acceptance, and inclusion. Those spaces across the board, were in classrooms with proactively supportive teachers, their GSA, and small friend groups. Participants shared feelings of belonging and acceptance when teachers would offer explicit statements of belonging and support. They also shared that having a small friend group means they can always find safety in school. “I wouldn’t be myself without my best friend,” Zaiden shared. Max also shared, “There is no better feeling than walking in a classroom and seeing a pride flag or a progress flag. Then I know I can relax and just think about learning.”

Access to gender-neutral restrooms and creating safety with restroom use has been a focus in emerging research led by trans and queer scholars. Not only do participants seek access, but they also believe the geography of restrooms in school matters. Participant Benito clarifies:

When I say gender-neutral bathrooms, I mean like throughout the entire school, because I used to have to walk to the other side of the school, to the nurse's office, to be able to go to a gender-neutral bathroom. So, being able to just comfortably go to the bathroom and not having to walk too far would be better.

Perhaps without realizing it, Benito has unveiled layers of marginalization and exclusion. Trans students who desire to go to a comfortable and safe bathroom may be late for class, miss valuable instruction time, and incur attendance penalties simply for meeting their needs. Zaiden explained his school's restroom policy and impact on trans youth:

Bathroom rules are not strict at all. Anyone can use any bathroom they like. However, I personally don't feel comfortable going into the male bathroom because all of the cisgender guys are high school kids. They don't know what they're doing. I wouldn't feel safe.

Safety involves both physical and emotional safety for trans youth, yet who is responsible for their safety?

Participants shared diverse perspectives on who they thought was responsible for the oppression they encountered in school. Lilly adamantly asserted that it was, indeed, the administration who refused to take action when a trans student would report harassment or abuse. She shared, "Admin doesn't take claims seriously. They ignore

what is clearly happening.” Similarly, Max shares that, although there is a zero-tolerance policy in their school, it is the students who break the rules and the “admin who refuses to do anything about it.” They elaborated, “Administrators and teachers who do not stand up for us and who don’t make rules and enforce them are the people making school harder for us.”

When asked who was responsible for keeping the school safe, Alex shared, “Every adult in the building who has power or control over kids is responsible. It is their fault if we are not safe, and it’s because of them if we are.” A sense of awareness of the cis-normative structures in school, Zaiden shared, “For sure it’s the adults, and I think it’s probably not teachers but maybe the people who make the policies.” Whether they understood structures, all participants shared that someone outside of themselves was responsible for creating trans inclusive schools and fixing the problems that keep their schools from being that way.

Participants Tony and Zaiden describe their challenges accessing gender-affirming resources such as binders. Zaiden shared, “It’s really tricky. Most of us have no one at home to take us to a clinic or help us figure out how to get what we need. And so we come to school, and usually don’t get help there either.” Tony shared, “All I wanted to do is talk with someone. Things have been really hard for me. But there’s all these rules and I’m not sure how to do everything on my own.” Other participants, Benito and Max, also share that if it weren’t for their supportive parents, they’d have no access to support or resources. Max suggested that the school could offer a room where the health

aid works where resources could be made accessible for students. Benito wondered, “Could GSA be the group that talks to teachers to get us resources?”

School counselors were a source of support for many participants. Alex, Zaiden, and Tony mentioned specific examples of feeling seen and valued by their counselors. While Zaiden thought “counselors should have more training about how to support trans kids,” he did share that he feels his counselor has been key in helping him figure out how to access GSA and mental health support.

Impact of School Culture

This third category of Theme 2 highlights perceptions of school culture and its impact on their experience, including both academic and social interactions. Participants shared about cis-normative structures and expectations surrounding gender and schooling. Participants also shared their experiences navigating oppression. More than half of the participants identified feelings of fear and worry about being harassed, and all participants shared examples of oppression as they navigate school. Two participants were able to name the impact of cis-normativity on people’s acceptance of pronouns and the need for explicit support from school staff. Those participants were Zaiden and Max. Each participant referred to gatekeeping that required their bodies to need “permission.” A couple of participants highlighted instances of exceptions to the gendered school experience. Alex and Tony described promising practices of supportive teachers, with specific actions that made them feel supported and seen. Lastly, this theme explores participants’ perceptions of exclusive policies, such as the unwritten policy of outing trans kids to parents.

Participants shared school experiences that ranged from stress about navigating relationships, finding support, and general experiences of being trans in the school system. When sharing their experiences about being trans in school, the experiences varied widely. Some participants experienced micro-aggressions, direct harassment and physical assault. Some participants, such as Zaiden, shared that their school was “really gay.” Zaiden described the GSA Day of Silence event and the corresponding hallway painted in pride colors. Other participants reported having a relatively neutral experience. Max shared that they mostly keep to themselves and only know one or two other trans kids. All of the participants described navigating oppressive or exclusionary experiences in school. Three participants described the school's climate as “dangerous and difficult.” Another three participants perceived their experiences as mostly positive outside their trans identity and expression.

Participants shared their varied knowledge of the expectations and culture of gender norms in school. Max mentioned that they desire a trans-inclusive school that has no gender, describing this school as “no boys and girls anything, no rules about who can go to the bathroom where, and as many gender-neutral options as possible.” Zaiden shared similar ideas about expectations that exist in his school along with cis-normativity:

Nothing in our school is gender neutral. We have teachers assigning us work and putting us in boys' and girls' groups. Plus, you know there's the whole girls and boys clothes thing. I had uniforms in middle school, so in my mind I'm a boy and being forced to wear a skirt.

Two of the younger participants were not able to identify specific expectations of the gender binary but alluded to this feeling that if you were not a girl or boy you were an “other.” Lilly and Tony both described teachers’ interactions with them as “stereotypical cis behavior.” All participants seemed to understand that at some level, they were being forced to participate in a system not set up for them to be seen, included, or successful.

As the oldest participant, Alex shared his experience moving from his home school to a smaller, alternative high school. The entire culture was one in which Alex felt he “may not survive.” Alex identified a series of what he referred to as “micro-aggressions” that culminated in him transferring his junior year of high school. He shared that he encountered, “multiple incidents” where staff or students had to step in to keep him physically safe. When asked to share more about why he thought he was harassed, Alex stated, “They want me to be invisible. Or quiet. I’m scary because I represent everything they don’t understand.” With a chuckle, Alex continued, “I’m just a kid. I have a boyfriend and a mom and a car. I work. That’s it. Just living life. Good thing I go to a school now where I can at least not worry about getting jumped.”

When asked if he encountered oppression through dead naming, Zaiden shared, “Yes. There was a time just today when it happened. Kids from middle school would dead-name me on purpose. Today was accidental. But there are times, even with teachers, where someone will slip up and call me my dead name.” Dead naming refers to an individual’s choice to call a trans person by the name they were given at birth rather than their chosen name. With so much out of their power, selecting their name holds a sacred meaning and purpose in the transition process for each trans individual. Dead naming has

detrimental effects on trans youth, especially when done intentionally or repeatedly. It is a micro-aggression with great harm. While these references to oppression are directly related to interpersonal exchanges, Zaiden also addressed the systemic oppression related to his name, “It’s hard to go through the school system, especially with two different names. Like, I’ve tried to put my preferred name on everything, but it’s hard to get around the legal factor of everything.” Youth participants may not be able to name all forms of oppression endured, but the oppression faced surrounding their names seems the most poignant and harmful. What is more sacred to an individual than their name?

Many participants shared their experiences navigating oppression in school that overlapped their intersectional identity as being a youth. Although many of the participants exhibited self-determination and were educated in their beliefs, they shared being invalidated because of their age. This included adults telling the participants what to do and think and believe, and the resulting feelings of not being taken seriously. They had these experiences within their broad lives and within school.

Zaiden shared that he felt like trans kids are “being forced into a box.” Max shared that they hear explicit and implied messages that their opinions don’t matter and their identity and very existence is not valid, “I’m an outcast.” They also explained that when trans youth and their identities are questioned, it’s essentially the school system and culture saying they cannot be trusted with their selves and identities. “It’s like we are dangerous and can’t be trusted.” This quote highlights the complexities of messages that society, in general, invalidate youths’ experiences and excludes them from their own experience within their world.

Max shared the irony of being expected to navigate a school system that is designed for them to be quiet and gender compliant. They shared a feeling of a deep self-concept and determination within a system that habitually and persistently oppresses their self. Max gave this example:

You let me choose a preferred name, then dead name me. You give us the option of using the restroom that aligns with our identity but won't keep me safe when I go in it. You tell me I matter, but don't let me learn about anyone like me.

Tony shared about the oppression felt with students, identifying that adults were responsible for the culture in school. He also shared that most of his problems came from being silenced and erased at home, "My dad constantly tells me there is no such thing as trans."

Need for Explicit Support from Adults in Power

The final category within this theme reflects several participants shared experiences with the blatant refusal of teachers or staff to use correct pronouns when speaking with or about the student. Several trans masc participants identified their primary struggle with male teachers. Tony shared, "Most of the male teachers don't give a crap, and will purposely say things like, 'Oh yeah, SHE's over there'." When asked how the misuse of pronouns impacted him, Tony described a "shrinking of me...it feels like a blatant f you ... people have to really try hard not to be kind."

Max addressed the reputation of his school for outing trans kids to their parents and to students within the school. They shared that their school allows students this shift in the system. Additionally, Max shared that any time a student requests support from a

counselor or discusses gender identity with their teachers, it's possible that parents will also be informed. They describe this as a culture of "mistrust" in which they "keep to themselves so no one gets in my business." Lilly reiterated this concern of being "outed" when she shared her experience of being out at one of her schools but not the trade school she attends part-time: "I was sent to the office for wearing a skirt to my construction class. Then they called my mom." Zaiden described this policy in his school as well. "I was thinking I'd have a fresh start at my new high school, but in the system, there's two names for me. When I asked to be called by my preferred name, the office called home to tell my parent. It's like I'm in trouble for being me." These youth comments highlight the need for schools to operate from trans-inclusive guidelines that keep youth safe and give parents their legal right to be informed. This process is currently in discussion in all school districts and will continue to be a challenge as leaders navigate best practices.

When asked about his experience with outing kids, Benito shared an incident in ninth grade when his dead name was listed in the yearbook:

One of my teachers wanted to help, then went to the office to find out what happened. Admin. Called home, and that was it. I didn't really even get to tell my parent I had chosen a different name. The school did it. That sucked.

Even seemingly supportive gestures from supportive staff seem to be construed as harmful when they do not involve the students' voices. Participants shared several solutions for this outing. Max shared, "The school could just ask us." Alex thought the best solution would be education for adults. "We aren't that hard to figure out, and it should be us who gets to say what happens for our own names and bodies." Participants

offered solutions to shift the impact on trans youth from harmful to inclusive by centering their voices and experiences on creating policies and safe school cultures.

Theme 3: Creating Belonging Through a Coalition of Community and Friendship

The third theme centered on students' experiences creating belonging through friendship and community. This theme was supported by the following categories: community and friendship and advice for trans youth. Participants described intentional self-exclusion as a matter of self-care. Participants who were members of their school's GSA shared the value of community, comradery, and detailed personal experiences with how the GSA had created safe spaces for youth. They shared individual and shared wisdom about the myth of the gender binary and ideas of what freedom might look like for them and others.

Community and Friendship

In the first category, many participants shared their experiences with community and friendship. Almost every participant reported having at least a couple of close queer friends. This category captures how participants navigated their gender identities in community and friendship, connecting with others who shared commonalities. Some participants shared their friendships and why they were important to them. Zaiden and Max described how they built deep friendships early in life with friends with whom they are still close. These friends were the individuals who helped them choose their names and the people who were the trusted first to know about their expanding gender identity. "Family" is how they described these friends. Lastly, Zaiden and Max shared that even though they enjoyed their friends, it could be hard to see them because their friends lived

far away or simply because they were busy and didn't attend the same schools any longer. These shared experiences are examples of typical friendship dynamics.

Tony shared that he “didn't really have many friends because he was often betrayed.” Although Tony loved being around people, he was an introvert: I “am only friends with my girlfriend and a couple other people. I'm okay with it.” He also talked about supporting younger trans and queer kids, especially those kids who did not have their familial support. “I can teach them the ways, make sure they're okay, and answer questions,” he shared, highlighting the importance of giving kids without unaccepting parents mentors. He felt responsible for answering this desire to support younger trans kids so they would not choose to die by suicide or become “invisible.”

Alex and Max provided examples of older trans and queer friends who supported them. Max identified a step-parent that had been influential in their development and also shared about middle school friends who had been supportive: “They were my inner circle when I was exploring who I was and how I wanted to express myself.” Alex mentioned that his boyfriend was his closest trusted friend: “He and I are the same person. We will never let each other get depressed or down about how hard things are. It's pretty great our connection.” Lilly did not know many other trans youth except her boyfriend. Her trusted adults were the two leaders of her GSA as school. Max mentioned they liked playing Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) with their friends, even joining the school club that meets weekly after school. Generally, the participants' friendships were important, foundational relationships in their transition and general daily lives.

Tony shared the value of trusted friends:

My girlfriend is also trans. She understands where I'm coming from. I don't have a safe family to come out to, but Rose is the one that helps me the most at the moment. You know, there's always someone you can trust and talk to.

Similarly, when asked who had made the greatest impact on his life, Zaiden responded by saying:

the one who's probably been the most helpful to me actually, be more myself and help me determine who I am as a person, is my best friend that I'm now in a long-distance friendship with because I moved. My mom is also someone who has helped shape me.

Advice for Trans Youth

The second category within this theme is the advice offered by trans youth participants to other, younger trans youth. Each participant shared recommendations for trans youth who wanted to either socially transition or come out at school. I am still investigating how those two ideas differ; however, participants all shared their best advice. Max and Lilly suggested that trans youth should befriend people who look like them to feel community and solidarity. Max emphasized, "I have one friend at school. They are trans too. Being their friend is like a lifesaver because they can relate to me, and we support each other." Other participants gave advice more focused internally and related to social emotional wellness.

Tony shared this bold advice:

If it's safe for you to come out, you have to go for it. Because once you're out, you feel better about yourself. It's actually dangerous to yourself not to come out. Know everything will be okay. You're going to get that body to look the way you want it to, and you will get treated the way you want to. It's gonna take a little time, but you're gonna get there.

Four years younger but two into his transition journey, Benito shared this cautionary advice:

Be careful. Not all people will have a positive outlook with you. There's gonna be so many different people who are gonna love you for the way you are. Especially if it isn't safe, you don't want to get hurt. Make friends you can trust. Always keep your eye out.

Zaiden described freedom in self-exclusion:

I am included a lot more than I'm excluded. I think the excluding is done a lot more by me because I feel a general sense of wondering what people are like, and how they are going to respond to me. So, I definitely could be included more, but I think a lot of the exclusion is done personally due to personal worries about how people react and everything. When I am alone and able to do me, I feel free.

As the oldest participant, Lilly stated that it was essential trans kids make plans for their future. Specific and joyful plans that they share with their friends and community. She shared that those plans inspire hope and the ability to overcome hard times. In Lilly's experience, making plans is how you bet on yourself to meet goals and

finish high school like they are doing this month. Tony shared that his big plan for the future is starting testosterone when he turns 18, and he is old enough to access health care. He shared, “You’re really not gonna make it if you don’t have a big plan. But I have to also focus on the present. Take one year at a time.” Tony demonstrates a tenacity to be present through the challenging and joyful moments, aware that what matters is his next best move.

Theme 4: Youth Lessons Learned and Recommendations for School Leaders

The final theme focused on lessons youth had learned and shared, as well as recommendations youth had for school leaders to create environments of inclusion for all. This theme was supported by the following categories: education for students and adults in power, representation, and support and inclusion. Participants considered what education could look like for those in positions of power and authority in school. Participants also shared their ideas for education and what student problem-solving might look like in their learning community. Participants address the value of representation in the school community and share what explicit support and access to resources would do for them in their journey. All participants shared valuable perspectives on improving the school experience for trans youth.

All participants shared their ideas for translating their experiences into helpful lessons for school leaders and staff members. While each participant’s school environments and cultures were vastly different, recommendations from participants were aligned and in tune with their lived experiences. This theme outlines participants’ shared recommendations to achieve trans-inclusive schools and systems of education. In their

unique ways, participants extended grace to school leaders. Zaiden exemplified this in the following quote, “We need to put ourselves in other people’s shoes and think about how they might feel and how they could be affected by this whole issue. To clarify, we need to think about how challenging it is to run a school or teach kids who are out and awesome and kids who have been taught to hate me at the same time. Leaders must create safer schools, but we must help them.” The first category within this theme is the need for trans-inclusive education of students and adults in power.

Education for Students and Adults in Power

While some participants feel teachers are generally supportive, others describe the painful experience of having to comfort and calm teachers who misgender them and then proceed to make a big deal in front of their peers or other staff members. Alex shared:

My teacher misgendered me in class. Right away she realized and began saying in a dramatic way that she was so sorry and how could I forgive her and it was really fucking awkward. Here I am a student just trying to live my life, and now I have to like hold her hand and make her feel better about herself. It’s not my job to make adults comfortable.

This keen awareness on Alex’s part is shared by Zaiden, who suggests, “If a teacher accidentally misgenders me, the best thing they can do is just quickly say, ‘Oops. Let me try that again’ and get on with it.”

Several participants shared the need for school staff to be educated on identifying when a student is being harassed or experiencing violence. Tony shared, “There is always going to be a sign that something is going on. You can’t just ignore it. When something

happens to us, adults need to pay attention and act.” Tony expands on this advice by sharing, “Talk to us. Ask us questions, ‘Hey, are you okay? Can I do something about this?’ Be more mindful of us, and you never know what is happening behind closed doors.” When asked to clarify, Tony explained that adults can always assume that trans kids will be unsafe in bathrooms and gym locker rooms, and suggests that those areas be carefully monitored. He goes one step further by saying, “Schools need 20 different lockers with single room stalls, and then someone should train the staff how to monitor that area just in case.”

Zaiden shared:

Somewhere in the system of education they need curriculum on what it means to be trans, or LGBTQ+, and how to challenge gender norms. Students and teachers need to understand what it means to us emotionally and mentally and be taught how to be supportive. I think teachers should know from lessons how to make us feel welcome.

Max concurred, “If kids and teachers had to do trainings on how to understand the binary isn’t real and we aren’t outcasts, they’d probably behave better. Be more kind. Include and tolerate us.”

Representation

The second category of this theme includes participant reflections on the importance of queer representation. Every participant said they would like queer and trans teachers and staff members. Lilly and Tony shared that several school staff members are openly out and lead their GSA; however, several participants were unaware

of any queer or trans representation in their school staff. Max shared that the one teacher he believes is gay is known for being bossy, so neither he nor his friends have tried to be in her class: “I’m a freshman. She is a trans feminine teacher who teaches higher level classes. Maybe some other trans kids have a different experience with her.”

Participants Zaiden and Alex shared how important they felt it was for trans youth to find queer staff representation, giving examples of relationships built with individual teachers who had been their lifeline in school. Alex described the deep relationships he has built with two teachers. Zaiden shared:

Mrs. Bull and Mrs. Brown are a same-sex couple, and I believe we also have other staff who are queer. We have a huge representation in GSA as well. It’s definitely made me more comfortable with who I want to be because of these teachers identifying like me and who I want to be. It’s cool. It makes me way more comfortable. I’m telling more people who I am and what I want to go by.

Lilly extended the conversation by saying, “For my construction class, the school could find trans men to teach the class.” She explained further that having trans men would encourage more girls or students, in general, to enroll in the course, designed to provide students with career skills. In this way, Lilly sees that representation “kinda equals more freedom and opportunities.”

Tony contextualized representation in school by sharing:

How the hell am I supposed to know how to turn out as a good, strong trans man if I never see or learn from someone who can be a role model and example for me? My dad is the last man I want to be like. It would be nice if my school could

hire trans men to mentor us. Just like Black kids are safer in schools and feel more comfortable with Black teachers. It's like that for me. Even if the teachers could just be queer. It seems like none of my teachers have ever looked like me.

As a participant with strong relationships with teachers, Alex shared:

My teachers are awesome. And they don't get me. I'm kinda like a project. They're learning from me. Shouldn't I have teachers who teach me how to become the trans man that navigates life? We are doing all the work, and we aren't even safe. One big improvement my school, all schools, could make is hiring trans people who have already gone through what we do. Maybe some depressed kids might still be alive if they had that. Maybe.

These reflections indicate that for these participants, representation has a direct impact on their social-emotional wellness.

Benito addressed another aspect of representation:

School should be a place of learning and education, and where adults could talk more about how certain aspects of history involve LGBTQ+ individuals. Trans information could be included in teaching lessons and the library. You can get somewhere, and make progress, including us in the story kids are taught. Include people like me in what you're teaching and do better about how you talk about us to students. Trans people have been part of lots of important parts of history.

Benito shared about personal relationships he had made that would not have been possible if he didn't socially transition and come out as trans: "I'm happy about having people who support me and embrace my identity just because I wouldn't have made them

if I wasn't trans." Additionally, he felt validated by the increased visibility of people who were trans in mainstream society: "even my favorite show, *Stranger Things*, has trans representation now. I used to never see trans people around, and now they're all over the place. I love it." Benito highlights the following statement about representation, "I'm proud that there are people changing the world and representing people like me and my trans friends." Representation in curriculum, on staff, in school and mainstream spaces seems to be a common theme of support and encouragement for the participants.

Support and Inclusion

The third category captures several participants' reflections on ineffective zero-tolerance policies in their schools. Max shared that they and other trans kids put their heads down and "try to keep to themselves," so they do not inflict harm upon themselves. They shared their belief that the administration does not enforce the zero-tolerance policy, "so, is it really a policy?" Max suggested that administrators and teachers undergo training on how to welcome and understand trans kids, then "make policies that keep us safe and visible. We wouldn't have to hide, and maybe we could have friends like everyone else does." Max was the only participant who seemed aware of an explicit zero-tolerance policy. In contrast, others knew nothing about what rules were in place to support and protect them. Alex shared:

In the classrooms, teachers write norms or rules that we must agree to follow.

Why can't we have those for school too? Like, ways that the school says they support us and that everyone belongs. It's not like we want to be special. We just want to go to school and be safe and not have to look over our back all the time.

One other participant, Zaiden, referred to the GSA and the “if you’re here queer” rules. He explained these to be norms of how each member treated one another with dignity and respect, and the expectation that all forms of disrespect would be addressed immediately by the group if and when those moments arose. He wondered if those same rules could be enforced on a broad school level for all students:

If you are here in *this* school, then you have to behave like this to your peers. It works in GSA, but we also are not the most popular kids. Actually, what is cool is that our valedictorian this year is a friend of mine. He’s trans too. So, make that more normal, where we can be leaders and make rules that help us be able to participate in all parts of school.

Trans youth are aware of their contribution to the learning community, and participants share their desire to be included and empowered.

Disconfirming Evidence

It is important to address the disconfirming evidence within the findings of this study. There are three distinct essences gleaned from the themes above, yet there are experiences not shared by all participants. For example, Benito shared that he does not have a difficult time navigating school as an out trans youth. Contributing factors include Benito’s fully supportive parent, access to gender affirming care, and attending an online school that does not require him to engage with teachers and students to the same degree that he would if he were to attend an in person school. While the other participants might grapple with different aspects of school and its oppressive structures, Benito attends school from his safe space of home and is surrounded by intense supports that keep him

buoyed even through challenging times. Another piece of disconfirming evidence revolves around exclusion. Max specifically states that they self-exclude at school as a measure of keeping themselves safe. Rather than the systems of school feeling like their primary source of exclusion as other participants documented, Max states that they choose to set themselves apart from their peers to maintain their internal peace and external safety. Both of these pieces of disconfirming evidence are important to address as they contradict the primary data collected and synthesized in this chapter. As a researcher committed to engaging in the difficult mental labor of synthesizing individual interviews and participant narratives with integrity, one essential step in documentation is acknowledging there is disconfirming evidence. I specifically sat with my disconfirming evidence within the structure of my reflective journaling exercise. The temporary discomfort allows new ways of thinking and the opportunity to clarify where my beliefs could have impeded new knowledge and articulate synthesis of the data.

Gleaned Essences

Describing phenomena and their essences is a common methodological goal in phenomenological research. There are three underlying essences of the phenomenon studied. The essences are shared here: (1) adultism; and (2) situational outness; and (3) defiant Joy and resistance. These essences were gleaned from core features that cut across the individual narratives of trans youth participants.

Adultism is the first essence of the phenomenon and answers the second research question: What are the shared experiences of trans youth within the public school system? Adultism is the oppression youth experience at the hands of adults in positions of

power and systems with adult-centered power dynamics. These participants experience adultism through both micro-aggressions and deliberate systemic policies of exclusion. Examples of how adultism affects these trans youth specifically include: dead-naming, refusal to use pronouns, gendered restrooms, and gendered schools. It also plays out in legislation drafted by adults and not informed by trans youth, where policy is drafted that directly impacts trans youth but fails to include their voice or perspective.

School is historically constructed and run by adults. There is power in the simple act of being an adult. Yet adultism profoundly impacts trans youth through the habitual and systemic exclusion of trans youth. Adults who are not educated to include and ensure trans youth have access to basic needs such as binders, mental health, and safe spaces to change for classes or use the restroom are all problematic aspects of adultism playing out in schools. Well-intentioned adults are culpable of adultism when they fail to hold students or peers accountable for excluding, harassing, or oppressing trans youth in schools.

The second essence, situational outness, answers research question number one: What is it like to be an out trans youth in a secondary public school? Trans youth are not all out across every aspect of their lives. That is to say trans youth are out to select members of their family and community of their own choosing. There are situations where they feel comfortable sharing and welcoming people into their story, and there are other places and spaces where they keep their identity as a sacred truth not to be shared. They choose to share moments of their gender transition journey with those individuals whom they trust. These trusted individuals often times are family members such as a

parent, but most often are close friends with whom they share bonds of companionship and trust. The participants' journeys varied, their experiences ranged widely, and their reasons for choosing who and when to come out to (or not) were all deeply personal and complex. All participants shared that they are happy to be out in the safe spaces of their individual lives. In these safe spaces being out is simple and joyful, with full support and inclusion.

For the participants in this study, gender identity is a fluid process, with moments they engage in introspection and reflection upon who they are and how they align. The process also involves an assessment of who the individuals are who would be safe and accepting and able to hear their news of shifting identity. Each youth participant identified moments of awakening or shifts in alignment with their identity. All participants experience their transition journey in different steps not all the same, yet each of them do go through a process of evolution involving name changes, preferred pronouns that may or may not change, as well as a point in time where they arrive upon a decision to identify as trans. In these sacred moments, trusted individuals are brought into the experience when the trans youth has aligned their internal and external being.

Gender expression is one aspect of trans youth lives shared with all those they engage with, including peers at school. Self-concept and acceptance drive trans youth and their gender expression, which involves what clothes they choose to wear, how they act, and their general appearance. A cis-normative society and normative expectations around gender drive all of these features of gender expression. For example, if boys wear pants, those trans youth who identify as trans men may choose to wear pants. While trans youth

understand the gender binary is a myth and they have the freedom to express themselves as they choose, it is also important to realize that gender expression does not speak to levels of trust or acceptance outside of oneself. Gender expression is evidence of a trans youth who feels comfortable in their skin and aligned internally and externally with their identity. Expression is the embodiment of self-acceptance, and has everything to do with a youth's relationship with self and very little to do with those who surround them. When trans youth feel comfortable with their own identity, they will express themselves more freely.

The third essence gleaned from themes in the data is defiant joy and resistance. We see defiant joy in trans youth creating coalition and belonging, in spaces like the GSA. Defiant joy is evidenced in the chosen names, selected attire, and personalities of the participants. In spite of a tidal wave of hate legislation and bills targeting their bodies, trans youth demonstrate defiant joy and resistance. Evident in their academic achievements and successful navigation of ninth grade, Max demonstrates defiant joy. In their self-exclusion and consistent pursuit to thrive Max counters gendered schooling. When Tobias speaks of members of his GSA as family, he demonstrates defiant joy. Like a tree that thrives growing out of stone, he thrives in an environment that should otherwise have stifled his growth and development. When Rose puts on a skirt and shows up to her construction class, she resists the cis-normative expectations and gendered roles put in place that silence and make invisible trans identities. As youth participants change their legal names and make steps toward medical transition, they are stepping into their own truth and in defiant joy. When Alex walks down the street with his boyfriend's hand

in his, he defies systems and structures intended to marginalize and silence him. Each narrative shared in this study reflects the essence of defiant joy and resistance. The two are inextricably linked. As they resist, their vulnerability increases. As their vulnerability increases, they step into their power and create their own coalitions and communities of belonging. We see in the individual and collective participant narratives a tenacious commitment to trans joy and a willingness to resist adultism, systems and structures of oppression, and a society that blatantly excludes, targets and marginalizes them. When asked what defiant trans joy meant to them, Alex stated, “When it seems like everyone around me has decided I’m the outsider and I don’t belong, but I can look at myself and how far I’ve come and I smile. When I go to Pride and march with my friends or I sit in GSA and look around at all the beautiful people, I feel joy.”

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings to address the following research questions for the study: (1) What is it like to be an “out” trans youth in a secondary public school, (2) What are the shared lived experiences of trans youth within the public school system, and (3) How can the shared lived experiences of trans youth inform secondary policy and practice toward trans inclusion and liberation? The results of the study speak to the purpose of this study which was to elevate trans youth voice to understand the meaning of the essence of their individual and shared lived experiences within school systems and to explore how school leaders might design high quality professional training for district and school leaders to design trans-inclusive, equitable schools. Four themes emerged from the data: (1) gender identity and transition journey; (2) navigating geography,

safety, and the impact of school culture; (3) creating belonging through a coalition of community and friendship; and (4) youth lessons learned and recommendations for school leaders. Throughout the presentation of findings, rich, thick descriptions were used from each of the six participants to share the nuances of the converging and diverging themes. All of the themes reflect the overarching convergent themes from all participants illuminating the layered essence of their lived experiences. Intentional quotes and thoughtful descriptions and examples from each participant created a connected, immersive dive into the complex identities and lives of participants. While some brief interpretations and contextualization of the findings were provided throughout this chapter, a deeper dive into interpretations will be presented in the next chapter.

Chapter Five: Conclusions

Chapter 4 provided an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of trans youth, highlighting individual narratives and gleaning the essence(s) of the shared lived experience of trans youth in school. The present chapter discusses these findings within the context of current literature and desire-based frameworks. Next, I explore implications of the findings, highlight study limitations, and offer recommendations for future research, policy, and practice. Finally, from this discussion, I share a deeper exploration into the participant narratives. The research questions for the present study were: (1) What is it like to be an “out” trans youth in a secondary public school? (2) What are the shared lived experiences of trans youth within the public school system? (3) How can the shared lived experiences of trans youth inform policy and practice toward trans inclusion and liberation? These questions were designed to capture the essence(s) of what it is like to be a trans youth in school today. As such, the primary purpose of this study was to celebrate and illuminate the shared lived experiences of trans youth in the Colorado public education system by elevating their voices to unveil the essence(s) of the phenomenon studied.

Trans Femme Voice Lacking

Before diving into the conclusions situated in literature, it is important for me to address the absence of trans femme voices in my study. In his recent work Nicolazzo

(2021) speaks of the “killability of trans women and trans femininity.” While his focus was on a reckoning in higher education, I see throughlines in scholarship, higher education, and even the present study. I pondered why a majority of my participants were trans masc individuals. I briefly considered that it might have to do with my own comfort and identity; however, I then realized it has everything to do with trans femme individuals not feeling safe or comfortable to share their stories. Our society has created a killability of their literal bodies and a silencing of their voices. Transmisogyny exists not only in broad society but also in literature. Combined with whiteness, transmisogyny silences trans femme voice. This fact is important to note, as readers consider what narratives have been lost and what defiant joy and resistance could have been witnessed and celebrated even beyond what was made possible in this study. As we witness the academy contributing to the silencing and invisibility of trans femme voices, it is imperative to consider the role and adaptations possible in P-12 education.

Acknowledging the limit of trans femme voice in this study is a first step to undoing the harm and erasure that is actively happening to trans women. It is our role as research activist and trans scholars to elevate and center the trans feminine experience. Designing desire-based studies that feature and celebrate trans feminine identities and voices is our call to action, as we disrupt the harm of cis-normativity and oppression. We replace harm with beauty, and transmisogyny with trans possibilities. As Cardenas (2016) stated, “This is the power and importance of affect: we need not see, show, or be understood by others to keep imagining, dreaming, and co-constructing the transrealities we need” (p. 313).

RQ1 Conclusions Situated in Literature

The first category of themes to be explored centers around trans youth participants' gender identity transition journey. The dominant cis-normative narrative of gender within Western cultures holds rigid views of a supposed static or fixed gender binary. Yet, gender is a mere social construct (Carerra et al., 2012). All children, not just trans children, construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct how they understand their individual gender identity and its culmination, which is gender expression (Ehrensaft, 2017). Many factors impact and sculpt gender identity, including one's brain development; biology; social, cultural and religious factors; and environment or nurture. Gender identity is now understood to be fluid and dynamic, shifting as these factors shape one's development.

Study participants shared narratives of gender identity development that align closely with these static representations and ideas of gender. The initial step in their gender identity journey involved a moment or series of moments of introspection and a realization that one's cis gender at birth did not feel true to whom they perceived themselves to be. Each participant spoke of an awakening or "aha" as they allowed themselves to begin the process of self-acceptance and actualization. Once they understood that they did not fit gender expectations and norms, participants began exploring identities outside the cisgender construct (Beese & Martin, 2018). Participants referenced moments of understanding on a core level that another gender outside the continuum resonated with their minds and body. At this stage of their journey, participants began seeking information that would inform their process, using the internet

and resources shared at school or in their community. Many participants began to measure their own identity and self-perception of trans individuals they knew either from social media or from real life. Participants researched new names, looked up diverse labels, and began to play with their identities and gender expression. They expressed their genders through hair, clothing, pronouns, chosen names, and, for some, trans men's binders. Some examples of this playful exploration were Benito choosing a variety of labels, including demi-boy before choosing trans man, Max cutting their hair to match their external and internal self, and Lilly wearing a skirt to a construction class.

Another aspect of participants' gender identity transition journey involved how participants made sense of gender roles and expectations. Participants could identify places and times in their life where dominant cis-normative gender roles had been forced on them, and places where they could imagine a more true-to-self reality. Max shared about growing up in a home without gender expectations, yet still adhering to societal norms of wearing clothes that aligned with their gender assigned at birth. Participants understood and could identify how dominant culture impacted expectations of gender roles and how they succumbed until they realized they disagreed or refused to allow others to decide what to wear, how to play and behave, and what style to embrace. Tony remembers when he finally refused to allow his dad to demand he dress like a girl, standing up to him when he suggested Tony go find a nice boy to date. Trans bodies and identities challenge rigid gender binaries, consistent with earlier literature (Beemyn, 2019; Lefevor et al., 2009). Participants provided creative and complex expressions and descriptions of their genders. Max's in-between space highlights the space within the

gender continuum yet outside cis-normative boundaries. Benito, Alex, and Zaiden described being trans as more of a self-imposed label, while Lilly described her gender identity as “home.” Rose used numerous labels to describe her gender; this process aligned with a recent study exploring more than 100 terms to describe youth gender identities (Trevor Project, 2020b).

One important aspect of their journey was identifying and selecting trusted individuals with whom to share their gender identity. As participants shared the news, they experienced a wide array of responses. It is a common shared experience that trans youth experience resistance or rejection when sharing their identities with family or others often being harassed, belittled, or mocked for their brave decision (HRC, 2018; Smith et al., 2014). All participants but one were greeted with support and acceptance by their families, with the one exception meeting resistance steeped in religion and cultural tradition. Max shared their parents were confused when they shared their news. Extended families became more complex, with all participants identifying parts of their family who had not earned the privilege of knowing their gender identity. Tony experienced micro-aggressions rooted in his dad’s religious beliefs in the sanctity of marriage and heterosexual relationships. All participants reported having at least one supportive immediate family member. Most shared that one family member was key in providing them with emotional support, access to resources, and help with having their name legally changed. In alignment with the literature, trans youth are empowered by finding their voice and being welcomed with tangible support from loved ones (Ingraham, 2015).

Most often, the trusted individuals were those long-term friends who had established trust and care with participants over the years. This finding informs the first essence of this phenomenological study. Trans youth are not all “out” across every aspect of their lives; rather, they share their gender identity and transition with a small group of trusted individuals, some of whom are family and others who are friends. This essence aligns with the research of Eve Tuck, who focused on countering deficit narratives with desire-based narratives. Rather than focus on the loss and grief involved with one’s transition journey, trans youth celebrate their relationships with trusted individuals with whom they share their sacred identities. Tied to the self-determination of marginalized and oppressed groups of individuals Tuck describes (2009) are the intentional action steps of trans youth in understanding the complexity of their lived experience, the nature of navigating transition, and the communication of their journey with others, as well as living their lives as authentic to be celebrated trans youth.

RQ2 Conclusions Situated in Literature

The second category of themes explored involved trans youth navigating geography, safety, and the impact of school culture. Consistent with the literature, participants speak to schools as a replicated microcosm of broad society, filled with oppression and erasure (Horton, 2022; McBride et al., 2021). This study is grounded in part with Kumashiro’s framework of anti-oppressive education, and participants described moments and structures of oppression within their school experiences. This study concludes that not only are there spaces including some unsafe school cultures (Nicolazzo, 2017), but also trans youth are confident and capable of navigating these

systems. This idea of vulnerability and resilience of trans youth is echoed in past literature (Hillier, 2020; McBride, 2021), and can be celebrated as self-determination and concept. This study and its findings align with systemic approaches to trans inclusion, as evidenced in emerging research (Farley & Leonardi, 2022; Meyer, 2022). Systemic approaches brought forth from participants in this study include explicit statements and policies to prevent bullying of trans youth, representation of trans bodies within the staff and administration, and building trans inclusive cultures through systemic training of adults in positions of authority within schools. A systemic, intentional shift to empower trans youth would be the antidote to power held over and abused by those in authority (Ahmed, 2013).

Power is used and abused to silence and erase trans youth in schools. Adults in positions of authority and power often do not support and may even perpetuate micro-aggressions toward trans youth (Meyer et al., 2016). Adultism is this abuse of power by adults who have been placed in positions of authority; yet, they use that authority to silence, isolate, exclude, and oppress trans youth (Austin, 2016). Adultism plays out in a variety of ways through cis-normative rules and routines (DeJong & Love, 2010). Participant experiences align with the literature as they describe the dominance of gender norms in their daily lives in school (McBride & Neary, 2021). Participant experiences affirm that policies of non-recognition and non-representation harm them and make them vulnerable throughout the school day (McBride, 2020).

The third category of explored themes focused on trans youth creating belonging through a coalition of community and friendship. This category supports the second

essence gleaned: situational outness. Trans youth are not all “out” across every aspect of their lives but rather share their gender identity and transition with a small group of trusted individuals. Schools have been designed to exclude trans youth (Austin, 2016); trans youth have adapted to the isolation and exclusion by forming coalitions in a GSA or through a small network of friends, many of whom share their same or similar gender identity and/or expression. These findings are aligned with the community of care that Spade (2015) describes.

The essence of trusted friendships is an important addition to the literature. While the literature does demonstrate a need for the system to create more opportunities for these coalitions and friendships within the community to be formed (Miller, 2022), I did not find other literature that focused on this aspect of the trans youth’s journey in detail. Fostering this community of care must shift from solely owned by trans youth to educational leaders and scholars within the research community (Mangin, 2022). This is a strength of this study because it also contributes to desire-based approaches and perceptions of the power in coalition and friendship and the vital role it plays in the beauty of the trans experience. It also coincides with trans liberation theory in that trans youth are seeking out their own liberation, and simultaneously all youth are liberated as one marginalized or oppressed community is freed.

RQ3 Conclusions Situated in Literature

The fourth and final category of explored themes centers on youth lessons learned and recommendations. This theme speaks to the experienced essence of adultism by trans youth and answers research question three: How can the shared lived experiences of trans

youth inform policy and practice toward trans inclusion and liberation? Across each participant's journey were themes of adultism, where policies were drafted that did not support nor create safety for trans youth (Farley & Leonardi, 2021). Grounded in Dean Spade's (2015) critical trans politics, this study elevates youth voices focused on their awareness of how policies have impacted representation for trans youth in both academic and social contexts. One of the participants' shared needs or gaps in their schools is representation within staff and throughout the school system. Participants lack adults in authority who identify and express themselves similarly to them. Consistent with the literature, trans youth want to feel seen and mirrored in their curriculum, staffing and administration (Meyer & Keenan, 2018). Policies have been drafted that isolate trans youth in restrooms, changing rooms, athletics, and their academic curriculum (Serano, 2016). Often, this isolated focus makes youth more visible yet less supported and creates layers of harm. Even well-intended policies can have the opposite effect; this sentiment also resonates in the literature (Spade, 2011). Ultimately, youth recommendations for policy and cultures of support are consistent with what literature has shown us is the need for educational leaders to become clear on their role in understanding and implementing legislation (Leonardi & Staley, 2018; Omercajjic & Martino, 2020) to ensure systems of support and inclusion.

Implications

Narratives related to the study of trans youth have almost entirely been deficit focused, highlighting the harm and detriment to trans lives through oppression (Keenan, 2019; Tuck, 2009). Yet this study aims to consider who appears and who does not

(Ahmed, 2013). To elevate the voices of trans youth is a shift from past research practices. Rather than focus on retrospective studies of trans adults who recount their school experiences, as has been done in the past, this study elevates minor voices about their distinct experiences in secondary schools. A potential narrative is advanced in this study, informed by these findings. Education is necessary for cis peers and adults in positions of authority (Hobaica et al., 2019). Based on the data collected within this study and in other emerging studies, it is evident that trans identities are misunderstood and therefore feared, disrespected, and excluded. The system is designed to work in the very ways it does; however, trans youth and researchers such as the one responsible for this study are committed to making things in the system unworkable. Bayard Rustin said, “We need in every community a group of angelic troublemakers ... Our power is in our ability to make things unworkable.”

Trans youth want to share their voice in this education, but do not feel it should be their responsibility. Just as it is not the role of Communities of Color to ensure those around them are informed of anti-racist actions, so it is not the role of trans youth to ensure peers and staff in school are informed and empowered to include trans youth in the daily routines and structures of school. While trans youth affirm they are the experts of their own experiences, they also share that they are indeed youth and not intended to carry the weight of an adult or someone who should already know better. Trans youth believe it is the responsibility of each cis peer and adult in school to seek out knowledge about trans identities, how to include them, and how to respectfully engage about chosen names, pronouns, and daily life.

Trans youth know the cis-normative structures that exclude and erase them from belonging in their learning community (Riley et al., 2013). They can identify the barriers to their inclusion and provide recommendations to break them down. One participant suggests that schools create gender-neutral restrooms and changing rooms for students with privacy doors or stalls to ensure that youth are safe in this typically unsafe space (Frohard-Dourlent, 2020). Trans youth participants speak to the gendered structures and routines of school and habits of administration and staff that perpetuate these oppressive norms.

From Theory to Practice

Educational leaders are responsible for each student in their learning community. The youth recommendations offered in this dissertation in practice offer ideas and guidance for teacher education and community education around trans bodies and identities to create a system of belonging and safety for trans youth and all students. Educational leaders are responsible for interpreting the language within local legislation as it is passed down through district channels. There is a balance of head and heart when implementing legislation. Leaders in Colorado have the advantage of being a refuge state with almost exclusively trans-inclusive legislation; however, a growing number of independent and anti-trans individuals are now running for school board elections to swing the pendulum of supports. Leaders' commitment to each child in their learning community requires bold adherence to the values of public education and to the inclusion of each student regardless of gender identity, sexual orientation, race, class, or other intersectional factors. To clearly understand the characteristics of designing trans-

inclusive school systems, leaders must first investigate the existing characteristics of exclusion. This shift in practice requires leaders to be empathetic and humble as they interrogate and dismantle their biases. Even as I am a part of this community, I simultaneously develop my critical research activism. As a critical queer scholar, it is my responsibility to continue learning how to design and engage in desire-based research. Being a part of a growing body of literature that celebrates trans bodies, identities and experiences is an important charge that has grown out of this study and inquiry. I do not desire to perpetuate narratives of harm and oppression in their community but rather seek out the trans joy and produce practical recommendations and structures that ensure the inclusion and liberation of trans youth in systems. As a part of this work, I am charged with forming my coalitions of research activism. This involves joining other trans and queer scholars to produce desire-based frameworks and share those with the field. As emerging leaders in scholarship, we can assist to shift the narratives and center trans experiences to create equitable systems, encourage educational leaders to assess their own culpability and opportunities for growth, and to serve as mentors and supports for the trans youth we interview.

The foremost contribution to advancing professional practice is the youth recommendations that can assist in informing high quality trainings for educational leaders and teachers. This study recommends explicit statements of support and support systems that should be designed and informed by trans individuals toward their liberation and inclusion. Emerging queer scholarship refers to this process as queering the schools (Hillier et al., 2020). I want to utilize this dissertation in practice as the groundwork and

frame for training that can be embedded in schools' beginning-of-year orientation with ongoing coaching to address trans inclusive representation, language, behavior intervention, empowering teachers to address harm and restore relationships, the composition of GSAs in each school, and the ongoing effort of educational leaders to continuously interrogate their systems for trans exclusionary practices, spaces and cultures of a lack of safety, and opportunities to repair harm and ensure trans youth have the equitable access to the education they deserve.

From Theory to Policy

Youth voice should be elevated to inform local, district and school policy as they should be an integral part of their own liberation and inclusion. Policy writing involves soliciting feedback on proposals and questioning stakeholders. Until now, trans youth have mostly been excluded from the policy writing process at the federal, state, local and building level. That must change. Trans youth are the experts of their lived experience and the best source of information to craft policies of inclusion and liberation for their own bodies and identities. How is policy ethical when the very lives impacted by its content have no seat at the table? Future policy must not only include trans youth voices but must center their lived experience toward liberation and inclusion.

Whether policy is being drafted at the local, district, or school level, this study contributes findings that should be considered as leaders review the role of public education and assess whether policy supports trans-inclusion or prevents it (Martino, 2020). Just as policy is in place to legally ensure students in special education programming receive their access to an equitable education, so should policy be drafted

to ensure trans youth are protected and given the accommodations they need to be fully supported and able to access their equitable education. This study informs trans-inclusive policy by elevating the gaps. It needs for change through the voices of the very individuals who are experiencing the harm of exclusion, oppression, harassment, and unsafe cultures in school. This study contributes by informing those who draft policy what trans youth know they need to be safe and feel as though they belong in school.

From Practice to Theory

This is one of few studies to elevate the voice of trans youth minors to understand their lived experiences. Other studies, including emerging research, primarily focus on retrospective studies that highlight the lived experiences of trans adults. Collecting data with minors can be time-consuming with the IRB process. Yet there is immense value in elevating the voices of trans youth at this age (13–17). Their experiences in these moments of their lives and within the secondary public school system provides valuable opportunities for educational leaders and practitioners to learn how their schools' systems, cultures and routines may be trans-exclusive, while also providing explicit calls to action that inform the dismantling of oppressive systems and deficit thinking around trans youth identities. This study is designed to empower educational leaders with not just a call to action, but first next steps to elevating trans youth voices in their inclusion and liberation in schools.

This study is a desire-based study focused on the assets trans youth bring to school each day, and the ways they use these assets to navigate schools designed for them to be erased and excluded. As Eve Tuck (2009) asserts, often literature that is written to

center the lived experiences of marginalized populations inadvertently perpetuates deficit thinking with a focus upon the harm done in the community rather than upon the assets marginalized individuals grow in response to their oppression. While there is certainly harm, there is much more joy and a response that seeks to educate and inform to improve the conditions within the school and the broader community so that trans youth have the opportunity to thrive, informed by their own words and language and experiences.

An important contribution this study makes to advancing literature is to elevate two essences of the phenomenon of the shared lived experiences of trans youth in secondary schools. While there are a multitude of gender identities within the LGBTQIA spectrum, with trans men, trans women, and a non-binary individual featured in this study, identifying essences that cut across each of their unique lived experiences was challenging. Yet, three essences were gleaned to inform and advance the field of literature: (1) adultism, and (2) situational outness; and (3) defiant joy and resistance. These essences resonated across each participants' journey, with themes that informed those essences. Scholars need to consider how these three essences may impact trans youth, and how we can collectively produce desire-based scholarship that centers their experiences and celebrates the most vulnerable and beautiful parts of what it means live a trans life at all stages but especially as a youth who is growing into the best version of themselves each day.

Based on the findings from the present study, I recommend a shift in thinking by scholars in the field of educational leadership from ideas of a coming out moment to a series of moments that make up one's transition journey. Let us listen to understand that

trans youth don't come out, but rather welcome people in. Through the process of completing this dissertation in practice and listening and learning from trans youth voice, I have grown in an understanding of the nuances of the gender identity journey and how unique the transition process is from that of a coming out process experienced by others in the LGBTQIA community who do not identify as trans. Not only do trans youth experience a distinct transition process, complete with moments of internal and external alignment, they also select a small select group of trusted individuals with whom to share their gender identity. Separate from the coming out or sharing of this sacred identity with their trusted friends and family is the transition journey tied to their gender identity. Listening to trans youth speak of these two separate concepts and including them in future research is one step toward trans youth liberation and inclusion in research.

Based on findings in this study, I recommend first that educational leaders interrogate their systems to find gaps in support and to assess whether they have explicit statements and structures of support for trans youth. This interrogation could be led by an annual or semi-annual needs assessment in which they survey trans youth to find where gaps of support may still exist. Administrators could embed a practice of equity audits and surveys with teachers and use the discipline data to determine if actions along the discipline matrix were being dealt out with integrity and equity for trans youth. The immediate need in terms of practice is for leaders in systems throughout our country to stand against anti-trans legislative language or district barriers to create language of belonging and intentional inclusion in the systems they lead. Actions could include selecting trans youth leaders in the school, identifying specific ways to honor trans bodies

and identities throughout the building and calendar, and including trans youth on panels and student leadership offices so that their voice was heard in equal measure to their peers. Separate from the professional obligation to maintain decorum lies the educational leaders' obligation to create safe spaces of equitable access to high quality education for each and every student. This can only be possible when guided by explicit statements and structures of support for trans youth and for all marginalized populations. Explicit statements of support can include policies of inclusion drafted specifically to protect trans youth along discipline matrices in schools, this would place a consequence for any individual who chooses to violate the policy of inclusion. Another statement of support could be an explicit administrative holiday during the school year where Pride was celebrated or a month where students would universally learn about gay icons and historical figures.

While recommendations require systems to shift and a broader timeline, a call to action can be made and carried out immediately. The call to action presented in this study is a call for all those who are educational leaders, practitioners, and researchers. Action can be made swiftly in direct response to this call. Trans youth continue to encounter adultism and discrimination within their schools at a far higher rate than do their cisgender peers. These rates are increasing across the country and mirror an increase in trans violence and anti-trans legislation nationwide. The truth is that students thrive only in safe environments; no student can learn while situated in experiences of violence, hostility, and oppression. The data about the negative experiences of trans youth underscores the importance of support systems within the home, which often requires

training from the school on how to access resources. It is the responsibility of schools to inform families of the need for education on gender diversity and to provide explicit messages of inclusion for trans youth. Trans and queer scholars, in collaboration with ally scholars, must forward explicit calls for schools nationwide to implement trans-inclusive policies to ensure that each student has equal access to an equitable education within safe learning environments. We must demand that schools provide trans inclusive resources to increase representation in curriculum, staffing, and across their lived experiences. These resources include books that highlight the trans experience and trans identities, binders, mental health resources as well as gender affirming care connections through counseling staff and the family liaison. Trans-inclusive measures must be explicitly designed with data-driven, science-based resources to support the increase in understanding about trans identities and bodies. Schools must train teachers, staff, and all students to respect and celebrate gender diversity. This can be done through intentional design of community norms and expectations surrounding mutual respect and peer relations. It can also be done through selecting identities of the month or investigating labels together or featuring a trans peer in school who is willing to tell the community about their transition journey, gender identity, and expression. There must be language drafted into trans-inclusive policies in schools to create systems of safety and inclusion for trans youth, informed by trans scholarship. Adults all play critical roles in ensuring the lived experiences of trans youth improve to thriving.

Listening to trans youth speak of their lived experiences in school and gleaning two essences of the phenomenon of living as an out trans youth in public schools has

expanded my understanding of identities and of the transition journey in opposition to a coming out event. My own knowledge has grown with trans youth informing me as the researcher about the moments and steps that occur throughout the transition process. As I sat with them, I saw cross cutting themes emerge and the essences shared, and more clearly understood that these youth exist as intersectional, resilient beings with full self-determination and concept (Nicolazzo & Catalano, 2015). I have begun to build connections between my theoretical frameworks, Eve Tuck's desire-based approaches, and my own findings that will inform future research. Understanding that trans youth are the drivers of their lived experience with free will to engage in their own journey in the face of oppression yet living their lives in joy moves me across my own intersections. No matter one's positionality or situated self within the lgbtqia community, we can all keep learning from trans youth.

As this was the first study known to explicitly center the lives of trans youth who are minors while using the phenomenological methodology, there are several opportunities for future research. From the findings, it is clear that trans youth believe their voice is essential in their own liberation and inclusion. Future research can contribute more literature to the field the lived experiences of trans youth through their own voices. Future studies focused upon trans youth should center their experiences and elevate their voices in terms of systemic change. Perhaps this is best done utilizing action research, specifically youth participatory action research. While many retrospective studies and studies focusing on college age trans individuals, future studies with trans youth who are minors would help inform trans-inclusive policy and practice.

Another direction of future research would be to continue using critical qualitative methodologies to explore how intersectionality impacts the lived experiences of trans youth. Contextualizing converging and diverging themes could connect gender identity with race, religion, ability, and sexual orientation. Future desire-based research could intentionally explore the experiences of black queer youth as there is much room to contribute knowledge regarding the layered nuance of these identities. Additionally, an important direction for future research within educational leadership is the role of educational leaders in the centering and celebration of intersectional trans youth identities. Lastly, future desire-based research could explore how educational leaders interpret local legislation and trans-inclusive design school systems.

Chapter Summary

This study aimed to understand the essence of what it is like to be out trans youth in secondary public schools and to understand from the voices of trans youth how their individual and shared lived experiences built upon that essence. Many participant experiences echoed findings in the literature, while simultaneously strengthening these findings due to the rich qualitative nature of the present study. Findings indicate that: (1) adults in positions of authority within legislative offices and school districts, legislators and practitioners, must make explicit statements of support and design explicit systems of support for trans youth; (2) trans youth voice must drive these trans-inclusive statements and systems. Schools must center the lived experiences of trans youth to dismantle oppressive systems through trans-informed recommendations; (3) all adults contribute to cultures of safety and inclusion and liberation. Adultism must not drive this work; rather,

it should be identified and deconstructed; (4) there is a unique transition journey for every trans youth that involves a small group of trusted individuals that is separate from a coming out event that other queer youth may experience, filled with moments of self-awareness and acceptance as well as moments of reflection, growing, and shifting identity, as well as their own inclusion of trusted friends and family into their journey; and (5) trans joy is felt through trans youth creating belonging through a coalition of community and friendship. These relationships exist and thrive even in spaces of oppression and erasure. Trans youth find their people and build community and friendship regardless of their environment, yet there is power in understanding that educational leaders can work to design intentional trans-inclusive systems where those opportunities for community and friendship are not only possible but habituated within the culture, driven by trans youth voice and supported by educated, supportive staff and administrators committed to trans inclusion and liberation.

Results from this study have profound implications within the field of Educational Leadership by expanding upon the knowledge in the field around the nuanced lives of trans youth. Future studies can further explore the lives of trans youth minors, hoping to continue to strengthen the knowledge and awareness of their unique experiences. While many aspects of trans youth's lives were shared in this study, it is important to note that their entire experiences nor the beauty of living the trans experience could be captured within this dissertation in practice. Educational leaders and scholars must hold space for what has been shared and all that has yet to be revealed through centering trans youth voice.

Through a phenomenological methodology exploring the lives of six trans youth, ages 13–17, I found that these lived experiences could be comprised of four themes. These themes encompassed their gender identity/transition journey; navigating geography, safety, and the impact of school culture; creating belonging through a coalition of community and friendship; and youth lessons learned with recommendations for educational leaders. I found three specific essences, or structures, illuminating the phenomenon study's characteristics. These essences include: (1) adultism; (2) situational outness; and (3) defiant joy and resistance. These three essences exist among the shared lived experiences of trans youth participants interviewed in this study and serve as poignant reminders of the education needed that centers trans youth and elevate their voice toward their liberation and inclusion. Bayard Rustin's quote resonates with these essences, as we center and elevate trans youth. Each of these youth exist in their communities as angelic troublemakers, making oppressive systems of schooling unworkable. Their identities disrupt cis-normative culture, and their defiant joy and resistance disrupts deficit narratives heaped upon them. The trans youth participants in this study and other trans youth who navigate their own shifting identities in a culture where their bodies and identities have been negotiated and legislated belong. They belong in every space cis straight youth belong. Not only do they belong, trans youth hold the power that is necessary for their inclusion and liberation.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Youth 1:1 Interview

Central Research Question:

1. What is it like to be an “out” trans youth in a secondary public school in Colorado?

Opening Protocol

Provide the Informed consent form to the participant and ask that the form be read.

After the participant has read the form, ask the participant if he/ she has any questions about his/ her consent, the research, or the process.

Answer any questions the participant may have, and ask the participant if he/ she is willing to participate in the study and to sign the two copies of the Informed Consent Form.

If willing to participate, give the participant one copy of the informed consent form and retain a signed copy for yourself.

Give the participant a face sheet for them to fill out while checking devices.

Read Preamble.

Preamble

Thank you so much for agreeing to this interview. The reason why I asked you to participate in this interview is to hear about and understand how it feels to be an openly “out” trans youth in your school. Today is _____ and we are at _____. I’m interviewing _____ today.

Your opinions, experiences, ideas and participation are very important in this study and may lead to deeper understanding of the experiences and assets of trans youth. Please know that I am here to ask questions and understand without judgment. I want you to feel comfortable to share the truth about your experiences, challenges and strengths. There are no right or wrong answers.

We are going to spend the next 45-60 minutes having this conversation. I am going to be asking you some questions about your experiences as a trans youth. The permission form that you signed means that we can record our discussion so that I can listen to it later and use it to write a report. I will ask the questions and I will also take notes of the conversation. No one but me and my dissertation director Dr. Lolita Tabron, PhD, will hear the recording or read the transcript of this interview. However, I’ll share my findings with the University of Denver and others as part of my dissertation oral defense. I will not put your name in the report (unless you have asked me to) so it’s OK for you to tell me what’s on your mind.

I intend to share general themes from our and other conversations with trans youth with my dissertation committee as part of my dissertation data analysis and findings. I will not

put your name or any other identifiable information that can be traced back to you in the final report (unless you have specifically asked that I use your chosen name).

During this time, I have several questions that I would like to ask you. To respect our time together, I may need to interrupt our conversation if we are running short on time. As a follow-up to this conversation, I may request additional comments and feedback during the writing of the data analysis of my dissertation to ensure that your opinion, experiences and ideas are accurately reflected.

Now I will ask some questions regarding your lived experience as a trans youth enrolled in a public middle or high school. You may ask me questions at any time during this process. If you would like to follow along, here is a copy of the questions I plan to ask.

Before we continue, do you have any questions? Great! Let's get on with the interview.

Introduction/Background
<i>First, I'd simply like to learn about you.</i>
<p>[Question 1]- <i>What is important for you to share about yourself and for others to understand?</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ <i>What is your age?</i>○ <i>What is your current grade level in school?</i>○ <i>What childhood experiences shaped you?</i>○ <i>Whohelped shape you into the person you are today?</i> <p>Listen for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive and negative experiences• Important family members, mentors, friends <p>Listen for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Important experiences and goals• Important people <p><u>Overall Themes to Listen for:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-Perception, Efficacy• Relationships• Values
Identity

Now, I'd like to hear about your identity.

[Question 1] What words do you use to define your gender identity?

- Which best describes you?
(Listen for/potential prompt)
 - I am trans
 - I identify in some other, additional way.
- Would you like to say more?
- What are your preferred pronouns?
- What does it mean to identify as non-binary? As trans?

[Question 2] Tell me your story of coming out.

Listen for:

- Self-identification
- Coming Out Story
- Transition and Gender Identity/Expression
- Broken relationships

Overall Themes to Listen for:

- Language
- Identity and Orientation
- Intersectionality
- Interpersonal Challenges

[Question 3] What is it like to be an openly “out” Trans youth at your school?

- Have you transitioned? Socially or medically?
- If so, when did you begin your transition?
- Are there parts of your life in which you are not “out”? Can you tell me why?
-

School Experiences

Now, I'd like to hear about the way(s) that you feel your identity plays a role in how you are treated in school.

[Question 1] What is your experience (internally and externally) with sharing your identity and gender expression at school? (*Identify 2-3 Focus ?)

- *Are there places in school or parts of your day where you have felt safe? Unsafe?*
- *What are your primary concerns related to safety?*
- *What has been your experience in the classroom?*
- *What has been your experience with adults in positions of authority?*
- *What are the bathroom facilities like at your school?*
- *Have you been directly impacted by anti-trans sentiment?*

[Question 2] *What experiences at school have helped to shape you as a Trans youth?*

- *What experiences have been helpful?*
- *What experiences have been harmful?*
- *Are you a member of any support groups, clubs, or organizations?*
- *How are you included?*
- *How are you excluded?*
- *What tangible ways do you notice that you matter in your school community?*
- *How are you able to share what matters to you as a Trans youth in your school?*

[Question 3] *How has your identity been received as a strength or an asset in your school?*

Listen for:

- Physical and Emotional Concerns
- Language, inclusive and exclusive
- Experience of safety or danger
- Opportunities to be heard, included, and valued
- Systems of Inequity

Overall Themes to Listen for:

- Safety
- Threats/Harm
- Adult Relationships/Treatment
- Peer Interactions
- Visibility, Inclusion, Equity

Youth Voice: Lessons/Needs/Recommendations

Now I'd like to hear about the way(s) that you feel your school could better support Trans youth.

[Question 1] What can your school do to make the experiences of trans youth better?

- *What negative things have you experienced in your school community because of your identity? How could your administrators make this right?*
- *What positive things have you experienced in your school community because of your identity? How can administrators do more of this kind of good work?*
- *What is not working? What should definitely remain in place?*

[Question 2] If you were given a chance to design a trans inclusive school, what would that look like?

- *What activities would exist?*
- *How would the design of the building be different?*
- *What would you recommend?*

[Question 3] What advice would you give to another student who is considering coming out as trans?

- *What is important for them to know and do?*
- *How would you suggest they navigate school to make it easier on them?*

Listen for:

- Perpetrators
- System and Culture
- Assets, Celebrations

Overall Themes to Listen for:

- Harm and Inclusion
- Positive perceptions
- Negative perceptions

Conclusion

Finally, I'd like to know if there is anything else you want me to know. I'd like to wrap up the interview by making sure I didn't miss anything.

At the beginning of the interview I asked what you about _____. Some of the things I heard include _____.

And I asked you about _____. Some of the things I heard include _____.

Has our discussion brought up any other issues about your experiences as a trans youth that you'd like to bring up?

You may be wondering about what I'll do with all the information you've shared today. Over the next few days, I will be transcribing all of the information from your interview. Out of all the things we've talked about today, what should I pay most attention to? What would you like me to think about when I read your interview?

Would you be interested in receiving a copy of the transcript?

You can contact me via e-mail or phone if you think of anything else that you'd like to tell me about what we've talked about today.

Thank you. I value your responses, and I really appreciate your help with this research!

**Appendix B: Parent or Guardian Consent/Permission Form
for Child's Participation in Research**

Title of Research Study: Liberation and Inclusion Through the Voices of Trans Youth: A Phenomenological Approach

Principal Investigator: Klaudia Neufeld- Doctoral student in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Lolita A. Tabron- Assistant Professor in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Study Site: Anythink Wright Farms Library and Virtually through Zoom or Google Meets

Your child is being asked to participate in a research study. Participation in this research is voluntary and they do not have to participate. Your child may decline to participate or to withdraw from participation at any time. Withdrawal or refusing to participate will not affect their relationship with the University of Denver in any way. You can agree to allow your child to be in the study now and change your mind later without any penalty. This document contains important information about this study and what to expect if your child participates.

The purpose of this form is to provide you (as the parent or guardian of a prospective research study participant) information that may affect your decision as to whether to let your child participate in this research study. The person performing the research will describe the study to you and answer all your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether to give your permission for your child to take part. If you decide to let your child, be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your permission.

What if my child does not want to participate?

In addition to your permission, your child must agree to participate in the study. If your child does not want to participate, they will not be included in the study and there will be no penalty. If your child initially agrees to be in the study, they can change their mind later without any penalty.

Purpose of the Study

If you agree, your child will be asked to participate in a research study about their experiences in school as an openly identifying trans youth. The purpose of this study is to give trans youth an opportunity to have their voice heard so that they can use their lived experiences in school to contribute to more equitable and inclusive school systems for trans youth in the future. We want to learn from their experiences to better prepare our

teachers and school staff on creating inclusive schools where they are seen, valued, heard and have access to an equitable education.

What is my child going to be asked to do?

If you allow your child to participate in this study, they will be asked to participate in an in-person or virtual interview to answer questions. Questions will refer to:

- what it's like to be a trans youth in school
- ways the system is working for them, how they feel included
- school and life experiences that might be negative, positive

This study will take about 45-60 minutes during one session, and there will be 5 other people in this study.

If you allow your child to participate in this study, they will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely. Klaudia Neufeld and Dr. Lolita Tabron will only have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept until June 2023, and then erased.

What you will you be asked to do in the study?

If you agree to let your child participate in this research study, you will be welcome to sit with your child in the interview. The interview will be scheduled based on a time you are available. Interviews will be conducted in a private conference room at the Anythink Wright Farms Library in Thornton, Colorado.

What are the risks involved in this study?

This interview may have minimal potential risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study. Interview questions will be personal and may cause some discomfort in reference to their gender identity or treatment as a trans youth.

What are the possible benefits of this study?

The possible benefits of participation are to inform stakeholders within the school community of the assets these youth bring and how they successfully navigate a system that is designed for them to be unseen, unsupported, or marginalized and oppressed. This study may transform educational practices and relationship building within schools and challenge the deficit views that often prevent trans youth from having equitable access to the education they deserve within the public school system.

Source of Funding

Klaudia Neufeld will not be receiving funding for this study.

Incentives to participate

Your child will receive a \$25 gift card for participating in this research project regardless of whether they participate fully or make the decision to opt out after having begun the process.

How will your child's privacy and confidentiality be protected if s/he participates in this research study?

Your child's privacy and the confidentiality of their data will be protected by Klaudia Neufeld from the University of Denver. Your child's individual identity and your identity will be kept private when information is presented or published about this study. We are required to keep your identity confidential and will use pseudonyms. Your child's name will not be used in any report.

Identifiable research data will be encrypted and password protected. Your child's responses will be assigned a code number. Identifiable research data will be encrypted and password protected. The list connecting their name to this code will be kept in an encrypted and password protected file. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed by May 2023.

In addition, when the researcher reports information, it will be reported for the entire group of research participants, never for any one individual. There are two exceptions to the promise of confidentiality. Any information you reveal concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect is required by law to be reported to the proper authorities. In addition, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena.

Information collected about your child may be used for future research studies or publications, but their identity will remain confidential. If information collected about your child will be shared, you will be contacted again for written consent. The information that you provide in the study will be handled confidentially. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released or shared as required by law. Representatives from the University of Denver may also review the research records for monitoring purposes.

Whom to contact with questions about the study?

Prior, during or after your participation you can contact the researcher Klaudia Neufeld at 970-778-0251 or send an email to klaudia.neufeld@du.edu for any questions or if you feel that you have been harmed. This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Denver's Institutional Review Board. The Faculty Sponsor overseeing this project is Dr. Lolita Tabron **and** may be reached at lolita.tabron@du.edu.

Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?

For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the University of Denver (DU) Institutional Review Board by phone at (303) 871-2121 or email at IRBAdmin@du.edu.

Consent to video / audio recording / photography solely for purposes of this research

This study involves video/audio recording. If you do not agree to be recorded, you can still take part in the study.

_____ YES, I agree to allow my child to be video/audio recorded.

_____ NO, I do not agree to allow my child to be video/audio recorded.

You are making a decision about allowing your child to participate in this study. Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to allow them to participate in the study. If you later decide that you wish to withdraw your permission for your child to participate in the study you may discontinue his or her participation at any time. You will be given a copy of this document.

Printed Name of Child

Signature of Parent/Guardian

Date

Appendix C: Assent Form

Participation in Research Minors Over the Age 13

Title of Research Study:

Liberation and Inclusion Through the Eyes of Trans Youth: A Phenomenological Approach

IRBNet #: 2042039-1

Researcher: *Klaudia Neufeld*

Faculty Sponsor: *Dr. Lolita Tabron*

Study Site: Westminster, Colorado

What is a research study?

A research study is a way to find out new information about something. The researcher would like to learn more about the lived experiences of trans youth within public middle and high schools and how educational leaders can create safe, inclusive learning environments in which trans youth can learn, thrive, and grow.

Do you have to participate in the study?

You do not have to participate in this study. It is your choice to make. You can say okay now to be in the study and change your mind later. All you must do is tell me when you want to stop. No one will be upset if you do not want to participate in the study or if you change your mind later. You can take time to think about being in the study before you decide.

Why are you being asked to be part of this research study?

You are being asked to join the research study because you openly identify as a trans individual and meet the criteria of being in a secondary public school in Colorado. There will be approximately 5-6 other youth participating in this study, including 1:1 interviews.

If you join the research study, what will you be asked to do?

If you agree to join this study, you will be asked to *answer a few questions about your lived experiences as a trans youth in public secondary schools as well as asked to offer your suggestions on how schools can become more inclusive, safe and liberating for trans youth.*

- You will be in the study for 45 to 60 minutes when participating in an interview.
- The researcher will ask you to answer approximately 8 questions.

- The researcher will want to audio record you during the study as you answer questions. If you do not want to be recorded, that is okay too. Just tell the researcher if it makes you uncomfortable.
- Finally you will be asked to review your transcript with the researcher to ensure your answers in the interview were transcribed correctly.

Your parent or guardian will not be expected to pay for *your participation in this study*.

There are other ways to help if you don't want to be in this study, examples include submitting an email in responding to the questions, or through the submission of individual artifacts that represent your lived experience in school.

Will any part of the study hurt or be uncomfortable?

The researcher thinks that *discussions on being considered a minority or marginalized youth* may be difficult to discuss, so at any time we can take a pause. Participation is completely voluntary, and you may stop at any time without penalty if you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed.

Will the study help you or others?

The researcher does not know if being in this study may help you.

The researcher may learn something that will help other trans youth with navigating oppressive school policies and environments.

Do your parents or guardians know about the study?

This study has been explained to your parent or guardian, and they said that the researcher could ask you if you want to be in the study. You can talk this over with your parent or guardian before deciding if you want. You do not have to be in this study even if your parent or guardian thinks it is a good idea. It is your choice.

Will anyone else know that you are in this study?

The researcher will not tell anyone else that you are in this study. You do not have to tell anyone about the study or your answers to the questions.

The information that you provide in the study will be handled confidentially. However, there may be circumstances where this information must be released or shared as required by law. Representatives from the University of Denver may also review the research records for monitoring purposes.

Who will see the information collected about you?

The researcher will keep all information on a protected folder on a drive protected with a password to keep your information safe throughout this study.

The information collected about you during this study will be kept safely on the researcher's computer and recording device, which will remain in a locked, secure place. Nobody will know it except the person conducting the research and their faculty sponsor, Dr. Lolita Tabron.

The study information about you will not be given to your parents/guardians, youth council liaison, school, or district. The researchers will not tell your friends about the study or your answers to the questions, etc.

Your individual identity will be kept private when writing the final report.

What do you get for being in the study?

You will receive a \$25 gift card for your participation in a 45 minute to 1 hour 1:1 interview.

What if you have questions?

You can ask any questions that you have about the study at any time. Just tell the researcher or your parent/guardian that you have a question. You or your parent/guardian can contact the researcher, Klaudia Neufeld, any time during the study by calling 970-778-0251 or emailing klaudia.neufeld@du.edu

Options for Participation

Consent to video / audio recording for purposes of this research

This study involves video/audio recording. If you do not agree to be recorded, you CAN STILL take part in the study.

Please initial your choice for the options below:

YES, I agree to be video/audio recorded/photographed.

NO, I do not agree to be video/audio recorded/photographed.

Please take all the time you need to read through this document and decide whether you would like to participate in this research study.

If you agree to participate in this research study, please sign below. You will be given a copy of this form.

Participant Signature

Date

Appendix D: Youth Marketing Email

Dear [Youth],

Hello!

My name is Mx. Klaudia Neufeld. I am a doctoral student enrolled in the Morgridge School of Education at the University of Denver. I am writing to ask if you will consider participating in my upcoming research study. This study is focused on trans youth and their lived experiences in secondary public schools. You are eligible to be in this study because you are a youth who openly identifies as trans within your community.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will participate in a one-to-one interview with myself. The interview will last from 45-60 minutes. You are welcome to invite your parent or guardian to sit with you during the interview. I would like to record your interviews, and then use that information to both make the lived experiences of trans youth in schools more widely understood and to support administrators and educators to learn how they can create safety for and be inclusive of trans youth in schools.

Please remember your participation is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you would like to participate, please talk to your parent or guardian first to ask their permission. They have received a letter similar to this and must sign the permission form for you to participate.

If you have questions about the study, please email me at klaudia.neufeld@du.edu or call me at 970-778-0251.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mx. Klaudia Neufeld
EdD Candidate
Morgridge College of Education
University of Denver

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Lolita Tabron - Lolita.tabron@du.edu

Youth Signature _____

Date of Signature _____

Appendix E: Reflexive Journal Prompts

1. What change to approach or design might be necessary at this time? How can you proceed?
2. What are the main categories and themes that emerged from this interview? What codes and/or categories fit into each theme?
3. What main insights have you gleaned? How does this connect to existing trans scholarship?
4. What are the answers to your research questions?
5. What is the data telling you? How does the data support (or not support) what you think you see?
6. In what ways are your values or lived experience impacting your listening? Are you projecting yourself onto the data?
7. How does your positionality affect what you see and what you may have missed?
8. What questions have you neglected to ask, and why? What are the participants not sharing, and why?
9. What are the visible and potential impacts the participants are feeling as they engage?
10. How are your biases showing up? What assumptions are you bringing to the data?

Appendix F: Member Checking Feedback to Action Form

Pseudonym	Comments/Feedback	Themes	Response/Actions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Clarifications ?</i> • <i>Information missed?</i> • <i>More you want to say?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Identity</i> • <i>Experiences</i> • <i>Recommendations</i> 	

Appendix G: Peer Debrief Feedback to Action Form

Name/Role:	Session/Format:	Feedback:	Response/Actions:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Person</i> • <i>Mentor/Other?</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Session number/date</i> • <i>Face-to-face or virtual?</i> 		