

School Policy and Transgender Identity Expression: A Study of School Administrators' Experiences

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Abstract School administrators are charged with establishing and enforcing school policies that provide safe and equitable learning environments for all students while adhering to state and federal laws as well as adopted school board policies. This qualitative research focuses on school administrators' experiences with transgender students' identity expression as it relates to school policies and student body experiences of transgender inclusion. Implications for district and building policy are also discussed.

Keywords Transgender; Gender nonconforming; School policy

Increasingly, professional organizations are addressing the issue of school safety and gender identity, and schools are responding with applicable policy. The American Association of School Administrators (AASA) supports the rights of transgender students to be treated in a manner consistent with that individual's gender identity in a safe and welcoming school environment. Not unlike the mission of school administrators, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) has released a position statement for school counselors working with LGBTQ youth that supports the mission of school counselors to "promote equal opportunity and respect" for all students and to "eliminate barriers that impede student development and achievement" (ASCA, 2014).

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School leaders are acutely aware that the social/emotional well-being of students plays a significant role in promoting academic success. As a result, school leadership is increasingly mindful of inclusion and “the removal of barriers to engagement and achievement [so that] young people would be able to participate, engage and succeed in various aspects of mainstream life” (Raffo & Gunter, 2008, p. 398). This mindful inclusion yields a theoretical framework for policy and “localising leadership,” where school leaders are empowered to craft policy that serves the unique milieu in which transgender students are learning. In constructing a social inclusion framework to analyze school policy and leadership, Raffo and Gunter (2008) deconstruct leadership into three categories: 1) delivery leadership, which is concerned with developing strategic plans to efficiently implement larger political structures (e.g., federal or state mandates); 2) localising leadership, in which leaders ensure national and state level structures are customized to local populations; and 3) democratizing leadership, which includes engaging the community outside the school to become stakeholders in education policy as well. Administrators serving transgender students in their schools experience all three of these leadership demands, and the way they perceive and cope with these demands is especially valuable.

As educators, we want all students to feel like valued members of the school community. With this in mind, the researchers used Raffo and Gunter’s (2008) framework of social inclusive leadership to explore the lived experiences of school administrators as they create environments that are inclusive for transgender students, their classmates, and the communities at large. Gaining insights into how administrators navigate the often fragile balance between accommodating transgender students as dictated by law (delivery leadership) and maintaining an optimal learning environment for all other students and their families (localising and democratic leadership) could prove invaluable for educators looking to compile best practices, design professional development opportunities, and learn more about an emerging special student population. To these ends, this research seeks to address the following questions: How would public school administrators characterize the school environment in regards to serving transgender students? What are their experiences in serving transgender students? What are the policy implications of serving transgender students in public schools?

Review of relevant literature

Risks and dilemmas transgender students face

It is important for school administrators to understand the unique challenges faced by gender nonconforming and transgender students so they may approach policy with inclusivity and safety in mind. Research indicates that “children who have nonconforming gender identities and expressions ... are common targets of bullying and harassment” (Slesaransky-Poe et al., 2013), with over 50 percent of transgender students reporting physical harassment and over 85 percent reporting verbal harassment, according to a study by Greytak, Kosciw, and Diaz (2009). In turn, transgender students are reportedly more likely to attempt suicide, be absent from school (Garibaldi & Pasillas, 2014), and fail to pursue a college education (McKibben, 2016). All of these factors add up to an issue extremely relevant to educators: an un-

safe school environment, or at least an environment perceived by students as unsafe, has very real and dire consequences for students if not properly addressed.

However, harmful bullying behaviors can manifest as subtle or even unintentional microaggressions that can go unnoticed or be dismissed by faculty, staff, and administrators. These microaggressions can be looks, comments, gestures, and exclusion in a manner that belittles or intimidates other individuals, typically those who are already within a marginalized population (Savage & Schanding, Jr., 2013; McCabe, Dragowski, & Rubinson, 2013). For transgender students, common microaggressions include intentional or unintentional misgendering, the assumption of a single “true” transgender experience and desire for accommodation, portrayal of transgender individuals as mentally ill or sexually deviant, and reinforcement of exclusionary gender binary-focused norms (Nadal, Skolnik & Wong, 2012).

Aside from bullying and harassment, even if transgender students choose not to identify themselves to their families or schools, many of them can struggle in their perception of having limited support and struggling to understand who they are and how the transgender experience impacts them (Kosciw et al., 2011). As stated by the Human Rights Campaign in their document, *Schools in Transition* (Orr & Baum, 2015),

Transgender students themselves may struggle with a variety of issues in seeking to be authentically seen, including the fear of social rejection and mistreatment or abuse from peers. As a result, many of these students hope to escape notice and to simply survive rather than flourish. (p. 1)

Certainly, all LGBTQ students can feel isolated or insecure in their school environments, which research has shown to impact their emotional wellbeing as well as their academic and ultimately professional success. These issues can be exacerbated when transgender-specific issues come to a head and administrators are forced to make choices regarding the accommodation of not only the transgender student, but all students in the building. Naturally, this debate centers primarily around bathrooms and locker rooms, a heated debate which can impact feelings of safety and belonging in transgender students, so it is important that administrators remain cognizant of support strategies advocating for transgender students through the accommodation process.

Recommended strategies and support systems

The role of the administrator in supporting transgender students primarily centers on building trust through well-crafted policy, a supportive climate, and confident navigation of the legal implications of supporting transgender students. To these ends, administrators must guide faculty and staff who navigate the daily interactions with transgender students through focused leadership and adaptability. McKibben (2016) suggests first meeting simple communication benchmarks, such as discussing the student’s preferred name and pronouns with the student and, subsequently, making these choices known to all faculty and staff so the student does not have to do so. In addition, Kosciw and colleagues (2011) propose more extensive school-based supports that can prove helpful to the psychological well-being (categorized as self-

esteem by Kosciw et al., 2011) of LGBT students, such as gay-straight alliance clubs (GSAs or GSCs), supportive educators, inclusive curriculum, and comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policies in schools.

Research also suggests that professional development focused on transgender students is often inadequate or under-utilized. According to Payne and Smith (2014), educators in their study expressed high levels of anxiety and fear in regards to effectively educating LGBTQ students as well as the community backlash surrounding the open inclusion of these students in the school environment. According to Sherwin and Jennings (2006), over 75 percent of surveyed teachers categorized LGBTQ issues lowest or absent from diversity-focused professional development training. Furthermore, MacGillivray and Jennings (2008) found that when LGBTQ students were mentioned in professional development, they were predominantly situated within discussions of suicide ideation, drug use, and sexual misconduct, which served to further alienate teachers from LGBTQ students, as many of them felt ill-equipped to handle students that had been characterized as extremely at-risk and in need of therapeutic intervention. This may have left these teachers feeling as if simply being supportive was not adequate to help transgender students. Burnes and colleagues (2010) suggest an interactional approach to supporting transgender students, including mental health education for faculty and staff (namely that gender identity being a choice is not supported by science, nor is a nonconforming gender identity considered a mental disorder), early and active intervention in hostility exhibited against transgender students, and seeking educational assistance from LGBTQ groups whenever possible.

Title IX and other protections

Title IX is a “federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs and activities” (U.S. Department of Education, 2011) and is perhaps the legal regulation with the most impact on the accommodation of transgender students, as federal funding is contingent upon a school’s adherence to Title IX guidelines. Schools that are not in compliance with Title IX are at risk of losing federal dollars that support school operations. In addition to Title IX, there are several other legal mandates in place to protect the rights and safety of students. Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 supports safe and drug free schools, for instance. Under this act, schools are required to maintain violence-free learning environments where students can attend school in a safe environment free of bullying and harassment and supportive of student academic achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Additionally, certain legal precedents protect transgender students’ accommodation needs and require administrators to meet these needs. In the case of the Doe v. Yunits case in Massachusetts (Doe v. Yunits et al., 2000), the court ordered that the school allow the student to wear the clothing of her choice after she was continuously disciplined by school officials to the extent that she missed an excessive number of school days, resulting in the inability to pass her grade level. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution protects freedom of speech, which according to the law, includes the expression of one’s gender identity. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act protects the personal information of students and families and prohibits

release of this information without consent. The Equal Access Act requires that schools treat all school-affiliated organizations and activities equally. Meaning, schools cannot exclude or ban certain groups over other groups. These policies are often supported and addressed through designated Anti-Harassment Compliance Officers within each school district.

Methods

Participants

The data in this study were gathered from four participants in total: three school superintendents and one middle school principal from three different public school districts within the same mid-western United States geographical region. The primary researcher chose this region as a sample site because of its drivable proximity to the researchers after determining that in-person interviews would yield more rich data than phone or emailed questionnaires, especially given the sensitive nature of the subject matter. The researchers emailed all school administrators from school districts in the chosen midwestern geographical region inquiring whether they had experience working with transgender students and, if so, if they would be willing to participate in this research study. All participants were white males with professional experience ranging from 10–30 years, and all had direct experience with students self-identified as transgender in their schools within the past 12 months.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and need for privacy of both the school districts and the students identified as transgender, Institutional Review Board confidentiality protocols were upheld and participants were given aliases in which only their role in the school district was revealed (Superintendent or Principal). The surnames assigned to the participants—Young, Evans, Garrison, and Cabot—are pseudonyms and do not refer to any superintendent or principal living or deceased.

Data collection

All data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted in the professional offices of the interviewees. In regard to all aspects of this research, the researchers held a constructivist epistemology, which does not operate under the assumption that all interviewees are able to elucidate a single objective reality about serving transgender students, but instead reveal glimpses into the specific realities that exist both in their school districts and in their own experiences as leaders. The researchers followed the concept of narrative practice outlined by Gubrium and Holstein (2012), which calls for the interviewer to acknowledge her implicit power as an arbiter of knowledge and the filter through which the knowledge created in the interview will flow. In acknowledging this implicit imbalance of power, narrative practice encourages active interviewee empowerment by utilizing verbal markers such as “go on,” “then what happened?” and allowing for some deviation from an interview script and allowing the interviewee to control a portion of the narrative.

Interview questions were open-ended and focused on issues related to student safety, community concerns, laws impacting administrative decisions, school board policies, professional development of school staff and faculty, school climate, and

special issues (e.g., locker rooms, restrooms, overnight field trips). The salience of these topics was informed by GLSEN (2016) and Wells, Roberts, and Allan (2012). Interview protocol is included in Appendix A.

Data analysis

The researchers analyzed the data according to Saldana's (2012) description of coding for sorting patterns such as frequency, correspondence, similarities, and differences across participant responses. Using Saldana's language, the researchers applied such "filters" as policy specifics and participants' perceptions of school climate in the wake of transgender students' identification. The researchers approached the first round of data analysis without any concrete themes formed *a priori*; however, researchers kept color-coded research memos, including general ideas from participants' responses that formed the foundation for themes, that would emerge in the second, third, and fourth rounds of analysis. Examples of points in these early memos include "Needs," "Behaviors," and "Rules," to name a few. After summarizing responses into these general categories, the researchers added specificity and tips/taglines to these responses, such as "Get out in front," "Communication is key," and "Importance of inclusivity." In the interest of constructing a cogent narrative, the final categories discussed in the next section were chosen based on universality across participants (i.e., all participants responded in a similar way) as well as overall pertinence to policy-makers.

Because the researchers used Gubrium and Holstein's (2012) concept of narrative practice to guide data collection procedures, active subjectivity was a salient component of the reflective practice during the analysis phase of this research. According to Gubrium and Holstein, active subjectivity presumes that interviewer and respondent neutrality is not expected nor encouraged, therefore interviewer biases cannot "taint" results because the interviewer and respondent are constructing a narrative together. This narrative is not an attempt to approximate reality; it is a reality in and of itself. Nonetheless, to ensure validity of resulting narrative, the researchers engaged in member checking; the researchers sent a first draft of the manuscript to interviewees for their input as to how well the researchers' narrative of their co-constructed reality meshed with their lived experiences. Interviewees provided positive feedback on the categories and discussion of these categories as accurate representations of their lived experiences. The following findings reveal the summaries of these categories as disseminated by the interviewees. Theory-based discussion of these results follow.

Findings

Adult responses and concerns

It was more emotional for the adults than for the kids.

Adults are foreseeably going to be involved, to some degree, in the debate regarding the inclusion of transgender students in the school community. According to the participants in this study, adults voicing concern for or even against transgender students ranged from school parents to non-parent adults within and even outside the school district. In many cases, adults contacting districts to voice personal opinions

were discriminatory rather than accepting, and “weren’t really interested in hearing anything factual ... facts and information and statistics and data didn’t help them at all” (Superintendent Young).

However, despite pushback from parents and community members, all four interviewees revealed that students and faculty were mostly supportive and presented little resistance to the accommodation of transgender students, while parents and other community members exhibited the most resistance and were often the underlying source of what little animosity was demonstrated by students. In fact, all the participants provided similar statements regarding the source of any potential animosity experienced by transgender students:

“I think you’re going to have—you’re going to see some pushback from the parent population” (Principal Evans);

“What I found as we’ve been through this, it was more emotional for the adults than the kids” (Superintendent Young);

“Kids handle this a lot better than the adults in my opinion” (Superintendent Garrison);

“I think our student of today’s world is a lot more accepting than some of the parents and all of us older folks” (Superintendent Cabot).

Overall, all interviewees portrayed their students as adaptable and mostly accepting of their transgender classmates, whereas the parents were often the most visible source of pushback against the accommodation of transgender students in their children’s schools.

Superintendent Young depicted parental resistance primarily as rooted in misinformation and fear that, despite administration’s best efforts, was often difficult to dispel:

I think that a lot of the adults, a lot of adults that I dealt with, they weren’t really interested in hearing anything factual, they had emotional feelings on it. Facts and information and statistics and data didn’t help them at all, it was irrelevant. I think some people are literally, they were scared that something’s going to happen to their kids at school and so forth. ... They thought now people can come into the bathroom and rape my child and so forth.

Principal Evans explained that the pushback and fear from parents presented a need for ongoing education aimed at parents, perhaps even more so than faculty, staff, or students. He explained that communication channels must be established early and often so that parents can be informed about what it means to be a transgender individual and how these students pose no threat to their children, even if these reassurances often fall on deaf ears, as was the testimony of Superintendent Young.

There was some level of bullying or exclusion from other students targeting transgender students, though as Superintendent Young attested, “Most of the kickback was coming in that [parental] direction and then what kids were bringing to school from what was said at home.” In other words, students, by and large, “just want to go to school,” and when left to form their own opinions, exhibit a more “healthy ... way [to] approach things” (Superintendent Garrison). Superintendent Garrison went

further to speculate as to the mindset of the students in schools accommodating transgender students: “Yeah, I like him. I don’t care; he’s a good guy, I don’t care; he does his thing, and I do my thing.” According to Superintendent Garrison, students are by default accepting and focused on their own studies and immediate friend groups and most often don’t view transgender students in a negative light unless the adults in their lives lead them in that direction, either directly or indirectly.

Safety and support

This is our school. This is our community. We want this to be safe.

School safety, for all students, is a primary concern for school administrators. All of the administrators interviewed in this study emphasized the importance of ensuring student safety in practice as well as communicating the district’s commitments around student safety to the students and their parents. Study participants discussed their intentional efforts to maintain these feelings of safety through targeted support for all students as well as vocalizing clear anti-bullying policies. Superintendent Young’s anti-bullying message was clear and inclusive: “Our concern was to not only keep our transgender student safe, but to make sure that other kids didn’t bully them, and if kids would decide I’m okay with it, that they wouldn’t get bullied as well.”

Superintendent Garrison made it clear that the safe learning environment and anti-bullying policy protecting transgender students must extend to social media and student interactions outside of school, not just physical abuse or verbal harassment during school hours. In this way, Superintendent Garrison characterized the protector role school administrators must take when accommodating transgender students, which should extend beyond the school building, with cyberbullying being a central issue to monitor continuously. Principal Evans extended this role even further by suggesting that school administrators can play a role in transgender students’ feeling safe and accepted in society in general, revealing a question with which he continues to wrestle: “How do we help that child feel safe in the society that we are in?” In this way, Principal Evans suggested that the school building is not only a place for transgender students to feel safe, and the administrator is not only a protector and enforcer of this safety; instead, the school can and should be the ideal place to preach acceptance and courage among young people, including transgender students and all students who support them, with administrators guiding these efforts.

Even without explicitly mentioning protection from bullying and harassment, the interviewees still emphasized the importance of a safe and supportive school climate for all students in which transgender students feel singled out and vulnerable as seldom as possible. According to Superintendent Cabot,

We, myself, and all the building administrators, and our staff in our buildings are very much aware that our role is to support all students, and make sure all students are safe at school and have a positive environment in school. ... This is our school. This is our community. We want this to be safe. We want this to be a great place to learn.

By placing such a high value on a safe and supportive school climate, the administrators in this study recognized the importance of school climate in the education

and achievement of students, thereby focusing not only on day to day interactions and accommodations (though those factors are certainly addressed), but on the students' overall success and education.

Meeting the learning needs of all students

When you have 4,400 kids, you have a variety of needs. We all got to get involved in it.

When discussing the day to day accommodations necessary to effectively serve transgender students, all of the administrators to some extent compared accommodating transgender students in their districts and buildings to accommodating special needs students and students with physical disabilities. These comparisons were not necessarily in content or any comment upon transgender students' capacity for learning, but rather spoke to the levels of accommodations and legal demands driving these accommodations. For example, when asked about how his school went about deciding how to disclose transgender students' status to parties within the school, such as faculty and staff, Superintendent Cabot compared transgender students to students with a food allergy, in that "you're worried about their safety; you're obviously going to make sure that all the teachers that that student interacts with are aware of that." Of course, disseminating transgender students' statuses is more sensitive than discussing a food allergy, but the comparison speaks to the prevalence of the perception of gender variance as a defect or at least as something that might be perceived by others as a defect, at least in the preliminary phases of accommodation.

Although many of the comparisons given by the administrators in this study were rooted in special needs accommodations, Superintendent Cabot summarized the inclusion of transgender students in the school community as just another facet of diversity, no different from any other type of student needing a supportive and effective learning experience:

We know that in our world today and society today there's diversity. I think we need to be accepting of that and willing to work with all types of people. All types of races and ethnic groups. The different subgroups that the state identifies with assessment. Even low-income and all kinds of students.

In other words, there is little need to single out transgender students as a unique type of student in need of drastically different accommodations than any other diverse student population. Ultimately, meeting the needs of transgender students comes down to inclusivity, as it would with any student.

Gender binary situations and transgender students

Why are they allowed to come in here? They are built differently than I am. That's not right.

Despite similarities to the accommodation needs of different groups of students, there is one caveat to accommodating transgender students that is not an issue in the diverse student groups mentioned above: gendered facilities and student privacy.

For the most part, the interviewees were clear about accommodating transgender students' wishes to use the bathroom of their choice, as in accordance with the law, whether or not that choice was a private bathroom, the bathroom of their identified gender, or the bathroom of their biological sex, all of which varied.

All the interviewees categorized bathroom and locker room privacy as the central concern for parents of students attending school with a transgender student, for the students themselves, and even for community members without children in the building. Therefore, all administrators expressed a dilemma in which they must balance the needs of transgender students with the comfort of the general student population, as a supportive, comfortable school climate for all students remained paramount in the administrators' minds.

Many of the administrators struggled with reconciling Title IX regulations that clearly bar discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, or orientation with community pressure to bar transgender students from using facilities congruent with their gender identity. Some administrators mentioned students using unisex staff bathrooms or private changing areas in locker rooms, though these were mostly portrayed as less-than-ideal final solutions. According to Superintendent Garrison, a central issue impeding the widespread adoption of private, unisex bathrooms is cost: "We are not going to build separate restrooms for transgender kids; we don't have the money, nor should we based on what our learning has been to this point." However, some administrators, like Superintendent Cabot, predict a sweeping gender neutral approach to gendered facilities in the school and beyond, rather than reserving gender neutral facilities for transgender individuals, possibly in an isolating way: "I think things are going to change, too. I think there's going to be more [options of choice], in all facilities, including schools. Sports arenas, you can see family bathrooms now. I think there's going to be a lot of gender neutral type facilities, and new construction [in public spaces]."

This theme of "de-gendering" traditionally gendered situations was common in how administrators worked to shift the school culture toward better accommodating transgender students. Whether it was locker room usage, sports participation, school dances, or overnight field trip accommodations, much of students' educational experience proved itself to be either implicitly or explicitly gendered, and some administrators outlined ways they have attempted to change this tradition. For example, at Principal Evans' school, activities traditionally known as "dances" are referred to simply as "social activities," and rather than promoting the cisgendered hetero-romantic aspect of these events, these social activities emphasize overall student bonding, group interaction, and general socialization without the romantic undertones of traditional school dances. In this way, all students, transgender or otherwise, may attend these functions with less fear of controversy because group attendance is emphasized over opposite sex couples.

Who is at the table? Questions of leadership and decision-making

It depends on the school. How the school's set up, where they're at.

When asked about school resources to help with decision making, creating and following school policies, and working with students and families, interviewees sup-

ported a localising leadership approach: collaborative teams that fit the needs and available resources of the school. These teams included administrators, teachers, counselors and other intervention staff, as well as the parents of the student. However, there are Title IX and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protections to consider when making the decision to divulge transgender students' status and accommodation needs and to whom. This ultimately begs the question of what sort of administrative structure best supports the immediate needs of transgender students, both legally and logistically. In this study, some participants advocated delegating more power to the building-level administrators to handle issues on a case-by-case basis, while some claimed that the establishment of district-level procedures is paramount for establishing a united front prior to any incident. For instance, when asked if a biologically male student would hypothetically be allowed to wear a dress to a school dance, Superintendent Young responded, "I think it depends on what your school, how your school is, and how they've decided to recognize transgender kids and where they're at." When a similar question, "Would a transgender student be permitted to use the restroom of their identified gender?" was asked to a building principal, Principal Evans stated, "I said, well, let me talk to my superintendent about that first; I'm not sure where we are on that." In some instances, superintendents allow the building administrator to determine how to proceed in applying school policy to such situations, whereas some building principals look to the district superintendent to guide the principal in how to apply school policy to issues related to transgender students.

Discussion

Leadership, inclusivity, and transgender students

Raffo and Gunter (2008) posit that social inclusion from a socially critical perspective implies that "whether benefits can be realized simply by overcoming certain exclusionary forces ... experienced by disadvantaged groups ... levels of inclusion/exclusion reflect unequal distributions of power and resource" (p. 401). Leadership by nature connotes power, but majority populations crafting policy about the inclusion of marginalized groups is still a function of power. The participants in this study recognized this power and expressed discomfort in being seen as the sole arbiter of policy affecting marginalized groups over whom they enjoy significant power and privilege. For instance, when asked how they go about implementing policies affecting transgender students, answers were accompanied with verbal cues such as, "well, that's a loaded question" (Superintendent Young), recognizing the statement of power implicit in speaking definitively about what is "best" for a large, heterogeneous group of marginalized people. Actually, most were eager to spread responsibility across the school and community and strongly preferred exercising democratic and localising leadership, shying away from any sort of top-down leadership style. Instead, they were more comfortable sharing their fluid policy goals, such as the promotion of safety, educating the community, and even a push toward a deconstructed conception of gender, rather than fully formed policy. Overall, the participants vacillated between the types of leadership described by Raffo and Gunter (2008) as functions of socially

inclusive leadership: delivery, localising, and democratic, indicating an internally motivated push toward social inclusion.

While participants' responses were strongly rooted in a localised, democratic perspective, delivery leadership, or the function of social inclusion in which leaders are go-betweens for government regulation and local operations, was implicit in all responses. However, unlike localised and democratic leadership functions, delivery leadership demands were less changeable, less subject to a single community's input. Participants did not comment on the extent to which they or faculty and staff agreed with statutes supporting the inclusion of transgender students; instead, they focused on how they educated the community and tried to implement generalized policy into situations requiring finesse and individualized planning. Overall, all stated that they were learning as they went but recognized that with the discomfort of navigating this unfamiliar, highly politicized situation, they grew as leaders and as people. Nonetheless, all expressed the need for best practices for themselves and for their personnel to which to turn when working through this process.

Implications for policy: Practical application

As stated by Superintendent Garrison, "I don't think it hurts if your policies aren't so clearly defined." This notion of fluidity in policy is consistent with LGBTQ literature advocating for the recognition of each person's unique experience and empowering them as primary stakeholders in their own narrative (Burnes et al., 2010; GLSEN, 2016; Wells, Roberts, & Allan, 2012), with school leaders using their given power to create a safe environment in which students can control that narrative. Still, all participants in this study advocated for a baseline anti-bullying policy, including zero tolerance for inflammatory language overall as well as taking on the role of educator, which is reflective of the ideal leadership role described by Wells, Roberts, and Allan (2012). With this in mind, it would behoove school leaders to find a happy medium between having a clear policy reference for administrators navigating contentious situations and being adaptable by allowing individual students to have a say in their own educational experiences—especially considering research into such microaggressions as the presumption of a homogeneous transgender experience (Nadal, Skolnik & Wong, 2012).

But what does this happy medium look like? How can a leader craft policy that exhibits delivery, localizing, *and* democratic leadership? Due to the constructivist nature of this study, the short answer is "it depends." When considering how to apply the subjectively constructed experiences of the participants in this study to more global policy implications, it is important to analyze the reasoning behind them, as well as how these reasons coincide with the mission and vision of the school, the values of the community at large, as well as the administrator's own leadership style. For example, clearly articulated policies are aimed at accountability and are used primarily as reference points in service of quelling controversy from parents and the community or even faculty and staff. If policies clearly articulate specific services and accommodations guaranteed to transgender students, school leaders may find the process of addressing dissenters' concerns easier to approach and defend. The majority of the participants in this study favored an adaptable, albeit accountability-

centric approach to policy, possibly due to the unique culture and community of their schools. All the participants in this study came from predominantly white, suburban/small town, and economically affluent midwestern U.S. school districts, and while politics weren't directly addressed in interviews, some participants characterized their communities as politically conservative. While the variables of political affiliation and acceptance of transgender students hasn't been extensively examined empirically, school leaders cannot ignore the highly politicized nature of transgender issues in the United States and its impact on the learning experiences of students.

However, again, despite the proclivity of school leaders to err on the side of clear accountability measures when crafting policy, research would appear to suggest that a more adaptable and fluid approach to policy might better serve transgender students' needs. After all, political climate is just one factor to acknowledge when cultivating a supportive learning environment for transgender students and crafting policies to that end. Findings from this study support the idea that transgender students require or expect a range of accommodations that may or may not coincide with best practices and existing school policy. Therefore, a central takeaway from this research is that leaders should implement policies informed by research-based best practices as well as legal edicts and standards, while also allowing for the contributions of transgender students and their families. Ultimately, these policies could simply state that school officials will comply with the wishes of transgender students and their families in terms of specific accommodations without disseminating the specific nature of these accommodations before communicating with students and their families.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

The sample size of this study was small and revealed the perceptions of a small subset of individuals, all of whom were white males who work and live in suburban settings. Therefore, the narrative yielded by this research is a privileged one, as researchers and interviewees alike identify as cisgendered. With these limitations in mind, future studies could utilize larger and more diverse samples of school districts and participants, as well as continue to follow changes in laws on the federal and state level. In addition, future research could focus on the experiences of the transgender students themselves and how school leadership and policy has shaped their educational experiences.

Concluding remarks

A safe environment where all students can not only learn, but also successfully develop social connections and a healthy sense of self, is something parents and educators hope for in the K–12 school system. School administrators are charged with overseeing district policies and operations and ensuring compliance with state and federal laws as well as meeting the highest quality of educational practices possible. To create school climates that foster a sense of well-being in students, policies will need to ensure the safety, acceptance, and dignity of all students regardless of race, religion, or gender identity. Currently, schools across the nation are navigating both legal and social issues of how to best meet the needs for student safety and optimize learning. The results of this study show that schools consistently look to state and

federal laws as guides to school policy. This is certainly necessary to the well-being of school districts, as considerable federal funding is contingent on legal compliance. The other factor that was vociferously stated by research participants is the concern for the safety and well-being of all students. The school administrators interviewed in this study expressed a desire to learn about and understand the qualities and needs of transgender students, just as they are concerned with all diverse students, thereby allowing schools to uphold school environments supportive of the academic, social, and emotional needs of students and thus to foster optimal learning.

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Appendix A

1. What are some concerns regarding students' safety for gender variant students?
2. What are some concerns regarding the school bonding and the development of peer relationships?
3. What do you think your school climate is like? How would you rate or evaluate the overall school climate?
4. What were the feelings and concerns voiced by other families who may feel uncomfortable, if not angry with the inclusion of gender variant students in the school environment?
5. What have been the responses and level of support or resistance of building faculty?
6. Do you know what type of information may have been provided, or what kind of questions were arising? For example, terminology, what do we do?
7. Would you say that the role that the school played in this process was helpful for the family as the process unfolded for them as well?
8. Can you highlight any primary legal concerns that the administrators need to be aware of?
9. Who's responsible for helping the teachers, alerting the teachers to information?
10. What types of risks do you think that gender variant students face in the school environment?
11. Do you think that these students are more at risk than other population of students?
12. What terminology do you use within your district? Do you use transgender, gender variant, gender expansive?
13. According to what you believe are the best practices, what can schools do to address gender variant students as a part of the schools community?
14. To summarize, would you say that creating an inclusive community that promotes positive values?
15. Who would be the administrative team?
16. Were there any particular resources that were utilized during this process?

17. Can you share practices that provide equitable policies to protect those students and school when navigating this type of dilemma?
18. What suggestions do you have for other administrators who will need to address this concern?
19. If biologically male student wanted to come in a gender identified female dress that would be permissible?