

5-1-2021

## Disrupting Gender Normativity Through A Social Learning Framework

Ashley Shank

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DISRUPTING GENDER NORMATIVITY THROUGH A SOCIAL LEARNING  
FRAMEWORK

By

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Bachelor of Arts – Criminal Justice  
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2018

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts – Criminal Justice

Department of Criminal Justice  
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The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas  
May 2021



## Thesis Approval

The Graduate College  
The University of Nevada, Las Vegas

April 4, 2021

This thesis prepared by

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entitled

Disrupting Gender Normativity Through a Social Learning Framework

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts – Criminal Justice  
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## ABSTRACT

Through a social learning theoretical framework, this thesis seeks to understand the mechanisms by which gender normativity is perpetuated, as well as how it may result in the marginalization of transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) youth. Additionally, ways in which TGNC youth navigate oppression and how discrimination against TGNC youth may be reduced through disruption of gender normativity are explored. Using qualitative methods that include the analysis of community meeting transcripts as well as townhall meetings with TGNC/queer community members, the present study will attempt to answer the following research questions through a social learning theoretical framework: 1. How can transphobic ideals and actions be explained? 2. How are transphobic ideals and rhetoric discussed? 3. How do transgender/gender nonconforming youth navigate discrimination and marginalization? 4. Can the cultural transmission of pro-trans values serve as a protective factor for transgender/gender nonconforming youth? This thesis will fill gaps in the literature by expanding on research pertaining specifically to TGNC youth and utilizing social learning theory to both explain and disrupt gender normativity and the harmful rhetoric associated with it.

*Keywords:* gender normativity, transgender, gender nonconforming, youth, social learning

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The United States has an extensive history of perpetuating heteronormative and gender normative values that have served as sources of discrimination and marginalization for the LGBTQ population, particularly transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) individuals (Buist & Stone, 2014; Toomey, McGuire, & Russell, 2012). TGNC people are characterized by a distinct separation between their biological sex, gender identity and expression, and socially constructed gender roles and norms related to such concepts. It is prudent to note the distinction between *sex*, which refers to biological attributes, and *gender*, which falls outside the biological realm and refers to one's identity, characteristics, and behavior. The common belief that biological sex and societal constructions of gender are interchangeable has resulted in a pervasive misunderstanding of gender identity and of the TGNC population as a whole. Moreover, the discrimination and marginalization experienced by TGNC individuals stems from the reality that they do not conform to societal expectations regarding gender roles and norms for the sex they were assigned at birth (Buist & Stone, 2014; Zeeman, Aranda, Sherriff, & Cocking, 2017).

TGNC youth are an especially vulnerable and stigmatized segment of the TGNC community (Biegel, 2018; Collier, Van Beusekom, Bos, & Sandfort, 2013). Research indicates that TGNC youth are far more likely to be harassed, bullied, and assaulted at school than their cisgender<sup>1</sup> and LGB<sup>2</sup> peers (Collier et al., 2013; McGuire, Anderson, Toomey, & Russell, 2010; Palmer & Greytak, 2017). Additionally, these youths are often disciplined more harshly by

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<sup>1</sup> The term *cisgender* refers to people whose biological sex assigned at birth matches societal expectations of gender identity and expression (see Zeeman et al., 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals are more likely to present as gender conforming than the TGNC population, which thereby reduces their likelihood of victimization.

school staff and are frequently ignored by staff when they are victimized by their peers (Glickman, 2016; Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Palmer & Greytak, 2017). In addition to the hardships faced by TGNC youth at school, this population is also more likely to be rejected or abused by family members (Katz-Wise, Rosario, & Tsappis, 2016; Simons, Schrage, Clark, Belzer, & Olson, 2013).

Despite recent gains pertaining to the rights of TGNC youth (Biegel, 2018), they nonetheless continue to experience disproportionate levels of abuse, rejection, harassment, bullying, assault, and discrimination (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; McGuire et al, 2010; Palmer & Greytak, 2017). These negative experiences do not operate in a vacuum, and frequently result in detrimental effects on mental health and educational outcomes for TGNC youth. Research indicates that the discrimination, abuse, and marginalization faced by gender diverse children may increase the risk of myriad mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideations, suicide attempts, self-injury, and negative self-perceptions (Collier et al., 2013; Toomey, Syvertsen, & Shramko, 2018).

This population is also more likely to experience academic difficulties due to safety concerns, such as missing school, lower grade point averages, and dropping out of school altogether. These academic outcomes may further disadvantage TGNC youth in a number of ways. For instance, lower attendance and grade point averages may lead to further academic difficulties during secondary education. Additionally, TGNC youth who struggle academically have fewer plans to attend college and may have trouble finding adequate employment, particularly if they did not obtain high school diplomas (Collier et al., 2013; Katz-Wise, Budge, Orovecz, Nguyen, Nava-Coulter, & Thomson, 2017; Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, and Truong, 2018; McGuire et al., 2010).

TGNC youth are also more likely to be involved in the justice system for a variety of reasons. First, they are disciplined more often at school than their cisgender and gender-conforming LGB peers, either because they fail to adhere to gender normative dress codes or because they are blamed for their victimization when they attempt to report instances of harassment or bullying (Glickman, 2016; Palmer & Greytak, 2017). Second, these youths may become justice-involved when they engage in illicit substance use as a means of self-medication for their victimization and mental health problems (Hirschtritt, Dauria, Marshall, & Tolou-Shams, 2018; Jonnson, Bird, Li, & Viljoen, 2019; Palmer & Greytak, 2017; Reisner, Greytak, Parsons, Ybarra, 2015). Finally, as a result of heightened levels of abuse and family rejection, many TGNC youth become homeless and engage in survival crimes (e.g., theft, prostitution) that result in justice involvement (Hirschtritt et al., 2018; Jonnson et al., 2019). Increased connections to the criminal justice system may further stigmatize and disadvantage TGNC youth, who must contend with being labeled as criminals in addition to the discrimination they experience due to gender presentation and expression (Rose & Martin, 2008).

These negative outcomes are a direct result of this country's history of gender normative values, which are reflexive in policies that continue to perpetuate the inequality faced by gender diverse individuals. The United States is known for its highly internalized ideas regarding the gender binary,<sup>3</sup> which labels anyone who falls outside of traditional masculine and feminine roles and presentation as wrong, unstable, or immoral (Kosciw et al., 2018). These ideals are legitimized by the systems of power that create laws and policies, which in turn allow, and even encourage, the marginalization and discrimination faced by gender diverse individuals on a systemic and personal level (Buist & Stone, 2014).

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<sup>3</sup> The gender binary refers to the prevalent belief that there are only two distinct, opposite genders (see Kosciw et al., 2018).

The pervasive gender normativity that continues to facilitate the oppression of the TGNC population is also responsible for school policies throughout the United States that allow the mistreatment of and discrimination against gender diverse youth (Biegel, 2018; Currie, Mayberry, & Chenneville, 2012; Glickman, 2016). Thus, it is imperative to tackle the gender normative culture that permits and perpetuates the abuses faced by the TGNC youth population (Currie et al., 2012; Koppelman, 2014).

Schools are among the most formative institutions in the lives of youth. In addition to being places in which children spend a sizable portion of their lives, they are also public spaces where cultural scripts, norms, and ideologies are developed (Marion & Oliver, 2012). The gender normative values that are often introduced to children at home are also taught and reinforced in many educational institutions through discriminatory policies as well as socialization with peers. This perpetuation of strict adherence to gender norms opens the door for exclusion, discrimination, assault, and bullying against TGNC youth who do not fit the gender binary (Currie et al., 2012; Glickman, 2016). In order to ensure more positive social and psychological outcomes for TGNC youth, it is necessary to implement gender inclusive policies and practices in school settings across the United States (Zeeman et al., 2017).

The introduction of gender inclusive policies in schools (e.g., access to bathrooms/locker rooms that align with gender identity, acknowledgement of chosen pronouns/names) has been effective in validating and affirming the gender identity of TGNC youth (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018). Even so, such legislation is frequently met with pushback from those who oppose and wish to fight against such inclusion (Vipond, 2015). Commonly touted rhetoric among gender inclusive policy opposers includes: fear that cisgender children (usually females) will be uncomfortable or unsafe when sharing facilities with their transgender

peers; fear that children's rights to believe in gender conformity (especially religious rights) will be violated; and a belief that gender inclusive policies will result in preferential treatment for transgender youth (Meyer, 2014; Stone, 2018). Such fear-based rhetoric originates not only from culturally transmitted heteronormative and gender normative values that have existed in the United States for generations, but also from a lack of exposure and education pertaining to transgender individuals. Anti-trans rhetoric is based on false assumptions, having the potential to be transmitted to the children of those who perpetuate it, which in turn results in immense difficulties for TGNC youth.

Through qualitative reviews of several transcripts from a local public school district's community meetings, as well as field notes from townhall meetings with gender diverse participants, this thesis seeks to understand the mechanisms by which gender normative ideals are perpetuated, as well as how they may result in the marginalization of TGNC youth. Additionally, ways in which TGNC youth navigate oppression, and how discrimination against TGNC youth may be reduced, are explored. Using a social learning theoretical framework, this study aims to answer the following research questions: 1. How can transphobic ideals and actions be explained? 2. How are transphobic ideals and rhetoric discussed? 3. How do transgender/gender nonconforming youth navigate discrimination and marginalization? 4. Can the cultural transmission of pro-trans values serve as a protective factor for transgender/gender nonconforming youth?

The following Chapter 2 will provide a thematic review of the literature employed in conducting the present study, with a primary focus on gender normativity and its relation to the discrimination, marginalization, and victimization of TGNC youth. Chapter 3 will include an overview of social learning theory, followed by a discussion of its relevance as a theoretical

framework for the perpetuation and potential disruption of gender normativity. Chapter 4 will detail the research methods of the present study, including an overview of secondary data sources, how the data is analyzed, and the limitations and strengths of the data and research methods employed. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 will outline findings from both secondary data sources and their relationship to the social learning of gender normativity. This study will conclude with Chapters 8 and 9, which will contain a discussion of the findings, how they were useful in answering the research questions, their implications for policy and future research, and closing thoughts.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter provides a thematic overview of recent, peer-reviewed literature utilized in conducting the present study. The following paragraphs will introduce the concept of institutionalized gender normativity and how it relates to the systematic oppression of the broader TGNC population. Because the present study focuses on the experiences of TGNC youth, research demonstrating the relationship between the culture of gender normativity, TGNC youth discrimination, marginalization, and victimization, and the negative consequences that ensue will follow. Then, protective factors and resilience strategies employed by TGNC youth navigating the gender binary will also be explored. The review will conclude with a discussion on the limitations of prior research.

#### **Institutionalized Gender Normativity and Discrimination**

Gender normativity, a “highly internalized” (Buist & Stone, 2014, p. 37) social norm in United States society, refers to ideology stating that one’s gender is intrinsically tied to their sexual organs, and that one must act in a feminine or masculine manner in accordance with their sex assigned at birth. Most children are taught and expected to adhere to traditional gender norms at a very young age, and those who deviate from these norms are frequently perceived as abnormal (Buist & Stone, 2014; Conry-Murray & Turiel, 2012). Gender normative rhetoric is particularly salient in some religious circles, whose members view gender transgressions as immoral and perceive acceptance of TGNC individuals as threats or infringements on their religious liberties (Donovan, 2016; Koppelman, 2014; Stone, 2018). The pervasiveness of gender normativity goes well beyond personal ideology and religious beliefs, however, as it has effectively infiltrated law and policy and legitimized TGNC discrimination and marginalization.

While many gender nonconforming behaviors, such as dressing in the clothing of the “opposite” sex, are no longer punishable by law,<sup>4</sup> gender normativity is still evident in contemporary law and policy. For instance, several state laws make legal transition to one’s true gender exceedingly difficult (Stroumsa, 2014). The ease with which transgender people can pursue name or gender marker changes on legal documents, for example, also varies from state to state (Buist & Stone, 2014; Restar et al., 2020). Some states require proof of medical transition, such as gender reassignment surgery or hormone replacement therapy, before such changes can occur (Restar et al., 2020). This can be very problematic, as not all transgender individuals wish to pursue medical transition (White Hughto, Reisner, & Pachankis, 2015).

Furthermore, access to affordable healthcare for transgender people who do seek medical transition varies by state (Plemons, 2019). In fact, many states outright deny Medicaid coverage of gender-confirming therapies, as they are often classified as cosmetic or experimental procedures (Stroumsa, 2014). These compounding legal difficulties frequently serve as barriers to transgender people who wish to live authentically as the gender with which they identify (Buist & Stone, 2014; Stroumsa, 2014; White Hughto et al., 2015).

Additionally, gender normative institutional policies often result in discriminatory treatment for TGNC individuals (Buist & Stone, 2014; Dietert & Dentice, 2015; Goodwin & Chemerinsky, 2019; Juban & Honorée, 2020). Research suggests that the TGNC population experiences much more gender identity-based workplace discrimination than cisgender individuals, with many employees reporting difficulties securing employment, greater workplace harassment, promotion denials, and terminations (Buist & Stone, 2014; Juban & Honorée, 2020).

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<sup>4</sup> In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, several cities began enacting municipal ordinances to prohibit dressing in the clothing of the “opposite” sex. One such example is Ordinance No. 5421 in St. Louis, MO, adopted in 1864 (see Buist & Stone, 2014, for more examples of antiquated laws based on gender transgressions).

Discriminatory practices are also evident within the military, which is known for policies that reflect a cultural adherence to the gender binary (Dietert & Dentice, 2015; Goodwin & Chemerinsky, 2019). TGNC service members experience disproportionate levels of harassment and discrimination from their commanding officers and coworkers, difficulties securing gender affirming hormone therapies and surgeries, and higher than average levels of depression resulting from such experiences (Dietert & Dentice, 2015). Moreover, the recently repealed transgender military ban<sup>5</sup> is reflexive of a greater gender normative culture, rooted in stereotypes and harmful rhetoric, that is particularly evident in the United States military (Dietert & Dentice, 2015; Goodwin & Chemerinsky, 2019).

Further, gender normative policies contribute to TGNC discrimination and exclusion in sports. For example, TGNC individuals are often required to use changing rooms that align with their sex assigned at birth, placing them at unique risk for anxiety, discomfort, and discrimination. Furthermore, the TGNC population frequently experiences systematic exclusion from sporting events and teams that correspond with their gender identity and expression (Hargie, Mitchell, & Somerville, 2017).

Gender normativity is also evident in criminal justice policy. For example, incarcerated transgender people are frequently housed based on biological sex rather than the gender with which they identify. As a result, this population is at high risk of adverse mental health consequences as well as physical and sexual victimization (Buist & Stone, 2014; Jenness, Sexton, & Sumner, 2019; Sumner & Sexton, 2016). Research by Sumner and Sexton (2016), for example, notes the negative consequences associated with housing transgender women in

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<sup>5</sup> President Biden's Executive Order 14004 (2021) repealed a policy implemented by the previous administration, which effectively barred transgender individuals from joining the military and from being able to transition while serving.

“rigidly sex-segregated and violently hypermasculine” (p. 637) environments such as men’s prisons. The common misconception that incarcerated transgender people are and should be treated like every other incarcerated person has led to marked failure on the part of staff to understand and address the social, mental health, and medical needs of the transgender population. Moreover, among staff and other incarcerated people, transgender women are often conflated with gay men. They are also frequently categorized with “social undesirables” (p. 630) such as pedophiles, rapists, snitches, and the mentally ill. This stigma contributes to the discrimination, demeaning treatment, and victimization transgender people experience while incarcerated.

Further, trans panic, a legal defense which relies on cultural gender norms to justify violence against TGNC individuals, is additional evidence of toxic gender normative beliefs infiltrating the criminal justice system (Buist & Stone, 2014; Wodda & Panfil, 2015). This legal defense is often invoked when a heterosexual, cisgender man attacks or kills a transgender woman he is sexually involved with upon learning of her transgender status. Trans panic is rooted in harmful rhetoric surrounding transgender individuals, namely that they are so deceptive, reviling, and shocking that any reasonable person would engage in violence against them after sexual advances or encounters (Buist & Stone, 2014). Thus, its use in court may result in more lenient sentences for such perpetrators. While some states have banned the trans panic defense in recent years, many others continue to allow its use (Wodda & Panfil, 2015).<sup>6</sup> This legal defense, based on inaccurate and damaging rhetoric surrounding TGNC individuals, effectively legitimizes the violence and discrimination this population frequently encounters (Biegel, 2018; Buist & Stone, 2014; Wodda & Panfil, 2015).

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<sup>6</sup> Alabama, Alaska, Texas, and Utah are among many examples of states that have no laws explicitly banning the trans panic defense. See Movement Advancement Project (n.d.) for a complete list of examples.

The culture of gender normativity, along with laws and policies that legitimize TGNC mistreatment, often result in pervasive discrimination towards this population. From discrimination in the workplace, to harsher treatment in the criminal justice system, to everyday experiences with being treated differently, TGNC people endure disconcerting levels of prejudice and injustice (Biegel, 2018; Buist & Stone, 2014; Koch & Bales, 2008). Ideology surrounding the gender binary stigmatizes the TGNC population by sending a message to society that deviating from gender norms is wrong. TGNC individuals are typically perceived, at best, as unusual, and at worst, as deceptive criminals and predators (Buist & Stone, 2014; Stone, 2018). The discrimination faced by the adult TGNC population is well documented in the literature (Buist & Stone, 2014; Dietert & Dentice, 2015; Hargie et al., 2017; Koch & Bales, 2008). However, recent research indicates that TGNC youth experience similar mistreatment.

### **TGNC Youth Discrimination, Marginalization, and Victimization**

Gender normativity has resulted in harmful rhetoric regarding TGNC youth, which in turn contributes to the discrimination and marginalization they face. Common “gender panics” surrounding TGNC youth include beliefs that they are deceitful, confused about their gender, that they threaten cisgender students’ comfort and safety when they are in traditionally gender segregated spaces, and that they are dangerous predators who enter such spaces to victimize cisgender students (Biegel, 2018; Stone, 2018). Because of these false assumptions, TGNC youth experience more rejection, both from families and peers, than gender conforming heterosexual and LGB youth (Katz-Wise et al., 2016; McGuire et al., 2010).

TGNC youth also endure discrimination at school from both peers and staff at much higher rates than cisgender students. According to McGuire et al.’s (2010) study on LGBTQ and heterosexual middle and high school students, transgender youth were more likely than cisgender

youth to experience harassment and discrimination from peers and school personnel. In fact, while 60% of the entire sample reported hearing negative comments from peers based on gender presentation, this percentage rose to 82% for transgender students in the study. Additionally, 31% of transgender students reported hearing negative comments from staff.

Indeed, gender nonconforming youth are more likely to be rejected or ostracized by their peers (Katz-Wise et al., 2016). They are also more likely to be ignored by staff when they report instances of harassment or bullying (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Palmer & Greytak, 2017). Thus, TGNC youth also tend to be treated differently by school staff, experiencing harsher punishments for minor infractions as well as indifference when they attempt to come forward with allegations of harassment or bullying (Glickman, 2016; Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Palmer & Greytak, 2017).

For example, research has found that TGNC youth are more likely to be mistreated when they report discrimination and are disciplined more harshly when they violate school policy. Glickman's (2016) legal review indicates that dress code policies are a method of instilling gender normative cultural values. As such, students who do not conform to gender norms are punished more harshly (e.g., through removal from class, suspensions) than cisgender students who exhibit similar dress and behavior. Palmer and Greytak's (2017) national survey of middle and high school students also indicated harsher treatment, finding that LGBTQ youth were more likely to be blamed and punished for their victimization.

Moreover, this population's rights at school are often pushed to the periphery. While many school policies have some form of protection for LGB students, these policies do not typically cover gender expression and presentation, forcing TGNC youth to rely on blanket anti-bullying policies that do not address their unique needs (Airton, Kirkup, McMillan, &

DesRochers, 2019; Biegel, 2018; McGuire et al., 2010; Taylor & Peter, 2011).

### **Marginalization in school policy.**

Historically, the TGNC population has not been a priority when it comes to anti-discrimination law and policy, even among broad LGBTQ+ movements. This lack of consideration for TGNC rights and equality serves to marginalize this population by denying TGNC people opportunities for advancement and protection from discrimination and victimization (Meyer, 2014; Vipond, 2015). Such marginalization is also evident in school policies across North America. For example, while many Canadian school districts account for sexual orientation in anti-discrimination policies, the inclusion of gender identity and expression in such policies is still in its infancy, leaving policies that do address TGNC youth incomplete and lacking in clarity (Airton et al., 2019; Taylor & Peter, 2011). A similar situation exists in school policies throughout the United States. According to Biegel (2018), the fight for transgender rights is considered “the last frontier” (p. 277) in the overall battle for gender equity. While TGNC youth rights are gaining more recognition in recent years, most states still do not have school discrimination policies that specifically address gender identity (Biegel, 2018).

The pervasive lack of trans-affirming school policies further marginalizes TGNC youth. For example, failure to provide restroom and locker room accommodations, acknowledge pronoun and name preferences, and accommodate gender identity in physical education and school-sanctioned activities may cause TGNC youth to feel invalidated and excluded, exacerbating the negative psychological and academic outcomes associated with discrimination (Katz-Wise et al., 2016; McGuire et al., 2010).

The discrimination endured by TGNC youth does not end at differential treatment, as this population also experiences alarming rates of school victimization. According to Kosciw et al.’s

(2018) national survey on school climates for LGTBQ youth, TGNC students are more likely to report hostile school experiences than gender conforming LGBQ students. The study also found that 59% of LGBTQ students reported verbal harassment based on gender expression, while 24% experienced physical assault due to gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2018). McGuire et al.'s (2010) qualitative study on transgender youth found similar results, with many participants detailing frequent verbal harassment from staff and peers as well as physical assault from other students.

### **Negative Outcomes of TGNC Youth Discrimination, Marginalization, and Victimization**

The experiences outlined above may result in a myriad of unfavorable consequences for TGNC youth. The literature has identified several adverse mental and physical health outcomes, negative social and academic outcomes, and risk of justice involvement associated with the discrimination, marginalization, and victimization of this population. These outcomes are important to note considering that, throughout the United States, an approximate 3% of teens identify as TGNC.<sup>7</sup> This number is expected to increase as more TGNC youth feel safe and comfortable revealing their identities to others (Dutra, Lee, Torbati, Garcia, Merz, & Shufelt, 2019; Rider, McMorris, Gower, Coleman, & Eisenberg, 2018).

#### **Mental and physical health consequences.**

As a result of discrimination and victimization, TGNC youth often exhibit negative health consequences, such as depression, suicidal ideations, self-harm, anxiety, and traumatic stress (Collier et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2010). In some cases, these outcomes may result in tragedy. Toomey et al. (2018), in their recent national survey on transgender suicide behavior, found that TGNC youth are much more likely to attempt suicide

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<sup>7</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2020), the estimated population of adolescents aged 12-17 is 25 million. Approximately 3%, or 750,000 of these youths, openly identify as TGNC.

than cisgender youth. About half of the transgender males who participated in the study reported a previous suicide attempt, while about 30% of transgender females attempted suicide. Among nonbinary teens, about 42% reported a prior suicide attempt (Toomey et al., 2018).

TGNC youth may also turn to alcohol and substance use to cope with the mental health issues that follow mistreatment. In their national study on United States adolescents and their experiences with bullying and substance use, Reisner et al. (2015) found that gender minority youth reported being bullied in school more often than their cisgender peers. As a result, these students were far more likely to engage in alcohol and substance use. While intended as a means of self-medication, the use of such substances further endangers the physical and mental wellbeing of this vulnerable population.

#### **Social and academic consequences.**

Along with the health risks outlined above, TGNC youth experience negative social and academic outcomes stemming from discrimination. According to Jonnson et al. (2019), sexual minority youth are overrepresented in the youth homeless population due to family rejection. TGNC youth are often kicked out of their homes, and many others run away because of the negative experiences they endure at home and school (Hirschtritt et al., 2018; Jonnson et al., 2019). McCann and Brown's (2019) systematic review of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies on the experiences of homeless LGBTQ+ youth outlines the myriad of challenges this population faces. LGBTQ+ youth who experience discrimination and exclusion exhibit more mental health issues, substance use, family conflict, and rejection than LGBTQ+ youth who are accepted by their families and friends. These experiences increase the risk of homelessness among LGBTQ+ youth, which may in turn lead to negative social consequences such as disruption of education and reduced employment opportunities.

Additionally, gender minority students are more likely than cisgender students to miss school, avoid school activities, and change schools altogether. Kosciw et al. (2018) found that peer victimization, a hostile school climate, and experiences of discrimination are related to missing school. In fact, students are about three times as likely to skip school when they have experienced victimization due to gender expression. Because such occurrences make TGNC youth feel unsafe and uncomfortable in school settings, many of these students feel as though avoiding school completely or changing schools is the safest option. These negative outcomes are important to note, considering that 4 in 10 LGBTQ students reported feeling unsafe on campus due to gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Victimized TGNC youth also have lower GPAs, are more likely to drop out of school, and have fewer plans to pursue post-secondary education (Collier et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2010). These negative social and academic outcomes may further marginalize this population. In addition to facing discrimination due to gender identity, these youths may encounter difficulties finding adequate employment and pursuing successful futures because of their unstable home lives and academic setbacks (Katz-Wise et al., 2017).

### **Legal consequences.**

The futures of TGNC youth may also become compromised due to an increased risk of justice involvement. The overrepresentation of LGBTQ youth in the justice system is well documented in the literature. For example, research indicates that up to one-third of court-involved youth may be LGBTQ (Hirschtritt et al., 2018; Jonnson et al., 2019). Additionally, LGBTQ youth may make up at least 15-20% of youth detained in United States juvenile justice facilities (Irvine, 2010; Irvine & Canfield, 2016; Wilson, Jordan, Meyer, Flores, Stemple, &

Herman, 2017).<sup>8</sup> However, recent research is beginning to indicate that TGNC youth are particularly at risk for justice system involvement.

Hirschtritt et al.'s (2018) Northeastern cohort study on adolescents in the court system found that about one-third of justice-involved youth were LGBTQ. While the number of TGNC youth in this sample was unclear, other recent research corroborates this population's risk of justice involvement. According to Glickman (2016), TGNC youth who violate gender-restrictive dress code policies are more likely to be punished, putting them at risk for justice involvement because of increased law enforcement presence in schools. Palmer and Greytak (2017) found that LGBTQ youth are more likely to be disciplined following victimization or missing school. School discipline, in turn, was more likely to lead to justice involvement. TGNC youth are also at a heightened risk of justice involvement because they are more likely to engage in illicit substance and alcohol use to cope with their negative experiences (Hirschtritt et al., 2018; Reisner et al., 2015). Moreover, homeless youth who engage in survival crimes, such as shoplifting or prostitution, are more likely to become justice-involved (Jonsson et al., 2019).

Justice involvement may further damage the futures of these vulnerable youths, as the presence of a criminal record in itself is stigmatizing without the added marginalization that follows deviations from the gender binary. The presence of a criminal record may also result in other negative collateral consequences such as discrimination in employment, voter disenfranchisement, and barriers to pursuing higher education (Rose & Martin, 2008). TGNC youth discrimination, marginalization, and victimization often result in far-reaching, long-term negative consequences that are detrimental to the overall wellbeing of this population. It is thus crucial to understand the protective factors that can prevent such negative outcomes and ensure

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<sup>8</sup> On any given day, at least 48,000 youths are detained in U.S. juvenile justice facilities (see Sawyer, 2019). At least 15-20% of these youths, or between 7,200 and 9,600, identify as LGBTQ.

more meaningful and successful futures for TGNC youth.

### **Protective Factors and Resilience of TGNC Youth**

While TGNC youth endure disproportionate rates of prejudice and mistreatment, positive outcomes are also beginning to emerge in the literature (e.g., Katz-Wise et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2013; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2014). This population can be surprisingly resilient, particularly when certain protective factors are present in their home and school lives. Family acceptance, social acceptance at school, and gender inclusive school policies have been shown to be effective in promoting resilience and improving school climate for TGNC youth. Research on these protective factors is summarized next.

#### **Family acceptance.**

Family acceptance may be crucial to TGNC youth resilience. Katz-Wise et al.'s (2016) qualitative study demonstrates the positive effects of parental acceptance. Through a comparison of two clinical case studies, one demonstrating the negative effects of rejection and the other depicting the positive outcomes associated with acceptance, it was found that parental acceptance may alleviate mental health problems related to rejection and discrimination and make hostile school climates more bearable.

Simons et al.'s (2013) quantitative research yielded similar results; their survey of 66 transgender youth presenting for care at a children's hospital on the west coast found that parental support was associated with fewer depressive symptoms and greater life satisfaction. Thus, family acceptance is important in understanding a youth's experience as a TGNC person as well as the impact of this experience on their overall health.

Similarly, Singh et al. (2014), through their phenomenological qualitative study with nineteen transgender youth, also highlighted the importance of positive familial relationships.

According to the participants, having supportive family members helps mitigate problems at school and provides TGNC youth with important outlets to discuss their emerging gender identities. Herein, the continued importance of positive family acceptance includes impacts on youth's educational experiences and performance.

### **Social acceptance and inclusive policies.**

Social acceptance and inclusive school policies are also important to TGNC youth resilience. Kosciw et al.'s (2013) national survey of 5,730 LGBT youth found that the presence of gay-straight alliance (GSA) clubs reduced the likelihood of LGBT victimization. Take, for instance, Singh's (2013) qualitative study with 13 transgender youth of color, which also highlighted the importance of GSAs and similar youth communities; participants who belonged to such organizations discussed a greater sense of belonging in the larger LGBTQ community as well as an ability to advocate for themselves at school.

Being able to participate in clubs, sports, and other school activities is essential to the wellbeing of TGNC youth, as involvement in such activities promotes inclusiveness in the overall school community and strengthens resilience among this population. For example, Zeeman et al.'s (2017) participatory qualitative study, which included a focus group with five transgender youth, found that inclusion in sports and other school sanctioned activities, as well as more safe spaces for TGNC youth to gather and bond, were related to increased resilience.

In addition to having access to inclusive clubs and sports teams, supportive educators are also related to reduced victimization, higher self-esteem and GPAs, and fewer missed days of school for LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018). The importance of supportive teachers and staff is exemplified by their ability to directly counter the negative academic consequences of discrimination, marginalization, and victimization. Students who have

access to educators who intervene in instances of harassment or victimization are more likely to feel safe at school. This reduces the likelihood that they will skip school and, in turn, results in higher GPAs and more positive academic outcomes. Furthermore, supportive and affirming educators may help mitigate the mental health issues associated with rejection and discrimination by protecting LGBTQ youth from hostile peers and ensuring that they feel accepted and included (Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018).

LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum is another important factor in reducing victimization and promoting more positive school outcomes for LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018). Such curriculum teaches students positive representations of LGBTQ people as well as relevant historical events associated with this population. As a result, LGBTQ students whose schools contain inclusive curriculum are more likely to report greater acceptance among their peers. This can have positive impacts on their feelings of self-worth and reduce the likelihood of peer harassment and bullying, further undercutting the negative outcomes associated with discrimination, marginalization, and victimization (Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018).

The presence of comprehensive anti-bullying and harassment policies also serves as a benefit to the LGBTQ youth population. LGBTQ students in schools with such policies are less likely to hear negative remarks related to sexual orientation or gender expression. Additionally, these policies increase the likelihood that staff will intervene in instances of verbal harassment and reduce the likelihood of victimization (Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018). TGNC youth also benefit from comprehensive policies that address their unique needs. Specifically, such policies increase the likelihood that TGNC youth will be permitted to wear clothing and use names and pronouns that align with their identities. Additionally, they are also less likely to be barred access to facilities that correspond with their gender identity or expression. As a result of

these benefits, comprehensive policies are related to greater self-esteem and sense of belonging among LGBTQ youth (Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018).

The above examples of protective factors and sources of resilience underscore the importance of disrupting the gender normative culture that is rampant in the United States. Changing the narrative to one of TGNC acceptance, accommodation, and inclusion has the potential of initiating the cultural shift that is needed to undertake such a task.

### **Limitations of Prior Research**

While the above research provides an informative snapshot of how gender normativity perpetuates the mistreatment of TGNC youth, it is not without its limitations. The primary drawback to this literature is the scarcity of research pertaining specifically to TGNC youth (Simons et al., 2013). A sizable portion of the studies in this review are broadly focused on LGBTQ youth. While TGNC youth are included in the samples, they do not receive the nuanced attention that is needed for such a misunderstood population. Thus, many of the conclusions and policy implications may not align with the specific needs of this population.

Additionally, prior studies involving TGNC youth rarely offer the viewpoints of opposing sides. Capturing the beliefs and perceptions of those in opposition to gender nonconformity (e.g., the religious right) would provide a clearer picture of how and why gender normative beliefs persist, offering researchers a greater opportunity to understand and help mitigate these harmful social phenomena while minimizing bias in the literature (Schutt, 2015).

Lastly, another notable limitation pertains to the absence of theory in prior TGNC youth research. While a theoretical framework may not be feasible for all qualitative studies on under-researched populations, which are often inductive in nature, theoretically-driven research on TGNC youth and gender normativity would be a welcome addition to the literature. Theoretical

frameworks are useful in that they guide the research as well as questions posed, conceptualize the nature of the research problem, offer ample opportunity to understand the setting of the problem, and inform subsequent observations of the phenomena examined (Schutt, 2015).

## CHAPTER 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY

The following section will discuss the history and basic tenets of social learning theory as initially outlined by Albert Bandura (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Walters, 1963). Social learning theory's potential role in perpetuating gender normativity and anti-TGNC beliefs will follow. The section will conclude with a discussion on how the tenets of social learning theory could serve to initiate the shift needed to disrupt the gender normative ideology that contributes to the discrimination, marginalization, and victimization of TGNC youth.

#### **Social Learning Theory: An Overview**

Social learning theory has roots in social behaviorism, a psychological movement that began to emerge in the early 1870s. This movement drew attention to the importance of one's environment in the acquisition of social behaviors (Woodward, 1982). Over the years and well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, social behaviorism eventually evolved into a series of stimulus-response theories, the most noteworthy among them being B.F. Skinner's operant conditioning. The underlying assumption of these theories is that behavior is acquired and strengthened through reinforcement and punishment (Skinner, 1957; Woodward, 1982). Social learning theory as it is known today, however, originated with Albert Bandura and his argument that interpersonal contexts and social variables are crucial to the learning process (Bandura & Walters, 1963).

According to social learning theory, learning is a cognitive process that requires social context and occurs primarily through observation and modeling. Humans learn by observing and modeling the behaviors, attitudes, and emotional reactions of others. Three different types of models may facilitate the learning process, including live models, who physically demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, and emotions; verbal models, who explain or teach expected behaviors and

attitudes; and symbolic models, which may refer to fictional and nonfictional characters in movies, television, radio, books, games, or online media. This latter category may facilitate learning in much the same way live models do. Social learning is not a passive process; while the learner's attitudes and behaviors are influenced by their social environment, they, in turn, influence their social environment through their attitudes and behaviors in a process known as reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963).

Mere observation is not sufficient for the social learning process. Whether or not behaviors and attitudes are learned depends on four necessary processes, including attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Learners must pay attention to what they are observing, retain this information, have the ability to reproduce the modeled behaviors, and the motivation to do so. If the model is someone that the learner particularly admires, or if modeled behaviors and attitudes result in favorable consequences, it is much more likely for the learner to retain and practice what they have learned (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Walters, 1963).

### **Social Learning Theory and Gender Normativity**

Social learning theory has long been established as a theoretical framework for the acquisition of social values and beliefs (Baldwin, 1973). The idea that gender roles and norms are learned, and that children are socialized into adhering to these norms at a young age, is likewise a concept that has been extensively explored in the literature (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Dietert & Dentice, 2013; Hardin & Greer, 2009; Perry & Bussey, 1979; Shaffer, 2009; Spinner, Cameron, & Calogero, 2018).

Under the tenets of social learning theory, children may acquire gender normative values through both observation and verbal modeling. For example, a child may learn, through observation and imitation of parents, older siblings, or symbolic models of the same gender, how

to behave in accordance with gender norms. This may involve acquiring clothing, toy, behavior, or activity preferences that align with stereotypical gender normative values (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Shaffer, 2009; Spinner et al., 2018). Through verbal modeling, parents or other influential models may actively teach children how to behave according to gender stereotypes, reinforcing such behavior through rewarding gender stereotypical behavior and punishing gender atypical behavior (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Shaffer, 2009). By the process of reciprocal determinism, gender normativity is then reinforced through association with peers who model similar behavior (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

The modeling and reinforcement of gender normativity may also contribute to the discrimination and marginalization of TGNC youth. Along with the teaching and reinforcing of gender norms and roles, children have historically been taught that behaving in a gender atypical manner is unfavorable or wrong, with some receiving punishment for exhibiting such behavior (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Shaffer, 2009). These ideals contribute to transphobic rhetoric in that they label those who do not conform to gender norms as deviant.

While the literature is relatively silent on how social learning theory could facilitate the victimization of TGNC youth, this framework has previously been explored as a mechanism by which bullying and discrimination occur (Barclay, 1982; Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Powell & Ladd, 2010). Children who adhere to the gender binary and have been taught that behaving in a gender atypical manner is wrong may exhibit such beliefs at school. This may then escalate to harassment and bullying of peers who do not conform to the gender binary, particularly at the hands of students who have been taught stringent gender norms and experienced more physical punishment at home. Through the social learning processes of observation and imitation, other impressionable students may begin to adopt similar

discriminatory behavior and contribute to the victimization of TGNC youth when they witness their peers reaping rewards (e.g., popularity) for such behavior (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000; Powell & Ladd, 2010).

### **Social Learning Theory and TGNC Acceptance**

Fortunately, social learning theory may also have potential as a mechanism for minimizing gender normativity and thereby reducing discrimination, marginalization, and victimization among TGNC youth. One way this may occur is through influential and valued authority figures in the lives of children. For example, parents and guardians who do not impose gender normative ideals on their children, or who are openly accepting of the TGNC population, may contribute to the disruption of the gender binary. This is also the case for teachers who model TGNC accepting behavior in the classroom. Through social learning mechanisms, authority figures who exhibit behavior and attitudes that model acceptance of all gender identities and forms of gender expression have a high likelihood of passing these ideals along to their children and students. In turn, through reciprocal determinism, TGNC acceptance may be passed along to these youths' peer groups (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Swank & Ruiz, 2010).

Association with prosocial peers who do not believe in strict gender norms, are more accepting of TGNC classmates, or are TGNC themselves may also reduce gender normativity. As children spend more time at school and less time under the influence of their parents or guardians, they begin to learn new social behaviors and norms from peers they deem valuable (Bandura, 1986). Van Hoorn, Van Dijk, Meuwese, Rieffe, and Crone's (2016) research details social learning as a mechanism by which youths, who become particularly susceptible to peer influence during adolescence, may learn prosocial behavior and ideals. Children who explicitly

demonstrate acceptance of TGNC youth, for example, may attract other peers who have not wholly subscribed to gender norms and see these peers as more favorable models than other influential people in their lives. Frequent interactions with TGNC peers may also go a long way in promoting the acceptance of this population. Previous research has explored, through a social learning framework, the importance of numerous direct interactions with gay and lesbian peers in promoting more positive attitudes regarding this population. The same principle may also apply to direct interactions with TGNC youth (Swank & Ruiz, 2010).

A social learning mechanism may also be used explain how some youths break away from gender normative values they previously subscribed to. Although a direct link between social learning and the unlearning of gender normativity has not been identified in the literature, prior research has used this framework to explain why some people might abandon previously learned religious beliefs (Hunsberger, 1983). Parental modeling often results in children exhibiting similar behaviors and values. However, there is always a possibility that some children will learn new social behaviors from valued peers and other influential people who resonate with them in a way their parents or guardians did not (Bandura, 1986; Van Hoorn et al., 2016). This may especially be the case when youths do not have good relationships with their parents or guardians, or when they have already had doubts about the values they were taught (Hunsberger, 1983). While gender normativity is a pervasive value that has been prevalent in the United States for generations, social learning theory has the potential to serve as an important mechanism for undoing the damages it has caused to countless TGNC youth.

The link between gender normativity, the discrimination against and acceptance of TGNC youth, and social learning theory has not been extensively explored in the literature. However, prior research on family and peer influences on the behaviors and attitudes of children and young

adults underscore this framework's potential as a mechanism by which gender normativity can be explained as well as disrupted. In this manner, the present study fills a gap in the literature by directly exploring the link between social learning and gender normativity.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODS

Considering many of the limitations of recent TGNC literature, including a general lack of research pertaining specifically to TGNC youth, the absence of viewpoints concerning those who oppose gender nonconformity, and the scarcity of theoretically-driven studies, this thesis is particularly important for addressing these gaps. Further, this study will broaden understanding of social learning theory, its relation to the continued perseverance of gender normativity, and its potential for disrupting gender normative beliefs that contribute to TGNC youth mistreatment.

This methods chapter will first discuss the research design and research questions employed in the current study. Overviews of both data sources will follow, along with descriptions of how the data were analyzed and coded.

#### **Research Design and Research Questions**

This study utilizes a qualitative research design in the analysis and interpretation of two secondary data sources, which will be introduced in this section and described in further detail below<sup>9</sup>. A qualitative design is appropriate for the present study, as the focus is on observations about human behavior and social phenomena that cannot be quantified or categorized in a numeric manner (Schutt, 2015). The first data source, a set of verbatim transcripts of four public school district community meetings in a southwestern state, was analyzed using an archival/qualitative narrative analysis approach (Feldman, Sköldbberg, Brown, & Horner, 2004; Jones, 2010; Lejano & Leong, 2012; Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006; Schutt, 2015). Open coding was employed in this analysis in order to identify common themes among the comments and concerns of community participants present at these four public meetings

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<sup>9</sup> This research has been reviewed and accepted under Institutional Review Board (IRB) # 1683794-1, November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

(Charmaz, 2014; Lofland et al., 2006; Strauss, 1988).

The second data source, based on participatory action research methods (e.g., Burns, Cooke, & Schweidler, 2011; Schutt, 2015), consists of secondary data derived from qualitative field notes. These notes were taken from two townhall meetings with small samples of gender diverse/queer community members at a non-profit organization in the same southwestern state. Via qualitative and observation analysis, the field notes were examined with the purpose of supplementing findings from the community meeting transcripts.

Utilizing the above research design, this thesis seeks to answer the following research questions through a social learning theoretical framework: 1. How can transphobic ideals and actions be explained? 2. How are transphobic ideals and rhetoric discussed? 3. How do transgender/gender nonconforming youth navigate discrimination and marginalization? 4. Can the cultural transmission of pro-trans values serve as a protective factor for transgender/gender nonconforming youth?

### **Data Source 1: Public School District Community Meetings**

The first data source the present study draws from is a set of archived transcripts of four public school district community meetings. These public meetings were approximately two hours long and took place at four different high schools in the Fall of 2017 and Winter 2018. The topic of these meetings concerned the implementation of a proposed gender inclusive policy to be adopted and enforced throughout all of the school district's 336 schools. The goal of this policy was allowing for more accommodation of TGNC youths' needs concerning matters of pronoun and name usage, confidentiality, restroom and locker room accommodations, and consideration of their needs in school sanctioned activities. Diverse groups of community members who were supportive of, in opposition to, or neutral/undecided on the proposed policy were all given

opportunities to discuss their concerns and opinions in order to determine the importance of and utility of the policy. Because this data is public record and available on the school district's public webpage, its usage in the present study poses no ethical considerations for the researcher of the current study.

### **Analysis and coding of transcripts.**

The public school district community meeting transcripts are secondary data sources, meaning that the data were originally collected by someone other than the researcher, for a purpose other than that of the present study. As such, a secondary data analysis, or an analysis employed when using already existing data in a new way, was conducted in this study (Schutt, 2015). Despite the fact that these transcripts were not originally intended to be part of this research, they nonetheless provide a convenient, readily accessible data source that is relevant to the present study on perceptions of TGNC youth and the importance of inclusive policy (Schutt, 2015).

Specifically, a qualitative analysis was utilized in the search for themes present in the transcripts. Because of this study's emphasis on interpretations derived from text, rather than numbers, qualitative analysis is appropriate namely due to its use in ascertaining meaning behind narratives or spoken words (Feldman et al., 2004). Qualitative narrative analyses have long been employed by researchers to interpret not only explicit statements, but to reveal unstated and implicit arguments, experiences, and perceptions outlined by the speaker (Feldman et al., 2004; Lejano & Leong, 2012). While this method is, by design, more subjective than quantitative analysis methods, it is nonetheless the most appropriate approach in the present study, as an in-depth and personal examination of the transcripts is necessary to identify common themes and how they relate to gender normativity through a social learning framework (Lofland et al., 2006;

Schutt, 2015).

Moreover, qualitative narrative and thematic analyses are often used in the interpretation of experiences and perceptions surrounding under-researched, marginalized, and misunderstood groups, providing important insight that paves the way for more detailed analyses in future studies (Caputo, 2020; Golden & Jocoby, 2017; Pryor, 2018). As the present study explores public perceptions concerning a relatively under-researched and misunderstood population, qualitative analysis is very useful in obtaining meaning behind the words spoken by opposers and supporters of TGNC youth in general and gender inclusive school policies in particular.

The present study also utilized archival data, or data that is collected and typically stored for long periods of time. Archival data, such as the community meeting transcripts, are beneficial to this project because they are generally amenable to systematic study, are often easily available to researchers, and offer researchers ample opportunity to analyze large sample sizes without the need for employing more costly or time-consuming methods (e.g., surveys, interviews) (Jones, 2010; Schutt, 2015).

Additionally, the current study employed a line-by-line open coding process in the creation of common themes in the transcripts. Open coding, a method commonly used in qualitative analysis, refers to a process by which “concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data” (Strauss, 1988, p. 101). Through the process of line-by-line coding, every line of text in the transcripts was assessed in order to ascertain what was happening, what was being represented, what was being exemplified, and what potential themes were suggested by the data. This process ensured that the personal accounts of community members were thoroughly considered (Charmaz, 2014; Lofland et al., 2006). Notes taken during the coding process were then rigorously examined, and commonalities among the perceptions of

meeting participants were identified and organized into common themes. These themes were subsequently re-examined through a social learning framework to determine their relevance to the theory. This iterative process assured that important concepts identified in the data were examined, refined, and organized in a detailed and meaningful manner (Schutt, 2015).

### **Data Source 2: Townhall Meetings with Queer Community Members**

The second data source for the present study comes from qualitative notes taken from two townhall meetings with gender diverse/queer-identified participants, which were made possible through a partnership of community members, professionals, and educators who work with a wide range of marginalized populations. These meetings took place at one of the local non-profit organizations in this partnership. The townhalls differ from the public school district community meetings in that there were significantly fewer participants, the meetings were discussion-based rather than debates about policy, and the respondents represented a much narrower segment of the community. Participants included TGNC community members (a majority of which were gender nonconforming) as well as persons who were broadly captured under the LGBTQ umbrella.

Originally, these participants were recruited in partnership with researchers from a local law school. The main interest, here, was to openly discuss gender diversity rights, the recently passed public school district's gender diverse policy discussed in the transcripts, and the participants' experiences in school. The first meeting, in which a total of four community members participated, took place in February 2019. The second meeting, which was held in March 2019, consisted of 11 respondents. While these meetings occurred over a year after the public school district's community meetings, this served as an asset to the present study, as the gender diverse policy discussed in the transcripts had already been implemented at the time of

the townhalls. As such, perceptions about the effectiveness of the policy were able to be captured. Both meetings lasted approximately two hours. Originally, researchers did not identify any of the participants. Therefore, secondary notes from these meetings do not include any extensive demographic information on any of the participants. However, there are several notes mentioning that participants were diverse in race, ethnicity, and gender identity and expression.

The participants were interviewed by two university professors who frequently work with the LGBTQ community and other vulnerable populations. With permission from participants and in partnership with the organization hosting the meetings, graduate and undergraduate students from the professors' respective departments attended the meetings as observers to take detailed, qualitative notes on the interviews. Focus groups, or group interviews in which participants discuss topics of interest through the encouragement of group leaders, were conducted to gain perceptions of the recently passed gender diverse school policy, positive and negative aspects of school, safe spaces at school and work, experiences with discrimination and bullying, how participants navigated such experiences, and what they believed could be done to improve school settings for gender diverse youth. These focus groups were relatively unstructured, with interviewers guiding the discussion but generally allowing the respondents to discuss their experiences openly and naturally (Schutt, 2015).

The participants were informed of the purpose of the meetings and the importance of their feedback and cooperation in identifying issues faced by TGNC youth in schools. Because notes and transcripts from the meetings were made available to the non-profit organization as well as researchers from the university, complete confidentiality could not be ensured. However, in order to preserve the confidentiality of those who participated, no names or identifying information were used in the notes taken.

### **Analysis and coding of townhall meeting notes.**

Because of their potential to provide depth and meaning to the research findings, the qualitative notes obtained from the townhall meetings were utilized in the present study to supplement the community meeting transcripts. The focus groups were conducted based on participatory action research (PAR), which involves, in some manner, active participation from members of the community being studied (Burns et al., 2011). Participatory action research is often used in qualitative studies because of its utility in incorporating input directly from the communities the researcher is focusing on. Through direct communication with the target population, the researcher is able to actively engage with them and help devise practical solutions that will truly address their needs and concerns in a way that cannot be wholly achieved with an outsider's perspective alone (Burns et al., 2011; Schutt, 2015).

Participatory action research has long been established in the literature as an ideal and effective method for fostering working partnerships between relevant community members, academics, and policymakers. These relationships, as well as the insight gained from target populations, are often invaluable in effecting meaningful change that would not otherwise be feasible. The present study is possible because of a collaboration between educators, community members, and professionals, all of whom share knowledge and resources that have important implications for gender inclusive state policies (Rosner-Salazar, 2003; Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Hutchinson, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004).

Recent studies on the LGBTQ community have employed participatory action research methods to shed light on relevant issues surrounding this population. Such methods provide indispensable information that can be used to address LGBTQ policy and community needs. By shifting power to the researched, rather than the researcher, participatory action research gives

marginalized communities, such as the TGNC population, a rare opportunity to educate and partner with academics in the search for meaningful solutions to their problems. The current study benefits greatly from qualitative notes derived from participatory action research, as the themes uncovered in the transcripts were examined with consideration of TGNC and queer community members' input. This method enriches and expands on the research findings by including the perspectives of those who have lived the experiences that the researcher aims to understand (Felner, Dyette, Dudley, Farr, & Horn, 2020; Proctor & Krusen, 2017; Wagaman & Sanchez, 2017).

While not verbatim transcripts of the focus groups, the townhall meeting notes are considered qualitative data because they are based on the observations of the researchers, who took extensive notes on the thoughts and perceptions of the participants (Schutt, 2015). When possible, direct quotations from respondents were captured to emphasize specific and relevant points. Because the author of the current study was an observer and note-taker during the March 2019 meeting, the analyzation of the notes from this meeting were accomplished via observation analysis. This means that details of the meeting recalled by the researcher, including the context of social interactions among the participants and the sequencing of events, were considered in the analysis (Schutt, 2015). Notes from the February 2019 meeting, which the author of this study was not present for, were examined via qualitative analysis of text alone.

An open coding process similar to the one employed in the analysis of the transcripts was used to obtain supplemental information for this study. However, line-by-line coding was not appropriate in the analysis of the notes, which are unstructured in nature and not verbatim transcripts of the meetings. Instead, a segment-by-segment approach was taken, in which topics discussed by the participants were analyzed as a whole. An iterative approach followed, in which

notes on common experiences and observations among participants were taken. These notes were then examined for relevance to social learning theory and re-examined alongside the transcript notes to determine how they were connected and fit together. This detailed process ensured that the data were pulled apart and put back together in a more meaningful and cohesive way for the purposes of the present study (Charmaz, 2014; Schutt, 2015).

The following three chapters will outline findings from both data sources. Chapter 5 will review common themes found among opposers of gender diverse school policy at the public school district community meetings, followed by Chapter 6, which will review themes identified among supporters of such policy. When applicable, observations and discussions from both townhall meetings will supplement these findings. Finally, Chapter 7 will discuss additional findings from the townhall meetings, namely the importance of experiential knowledge and understanding the perspectives of those impacted by gender inclusive policies. Direct quotations from the public school district community meetings will be cited as follows: Public Meeting #, Community Member # (PM#, CM#). Quotations from the townhall meetings will be cited as: Townhall #, Participant # (TH#, P#). In the interest of de-identifying the public school district, whenever a participant mentions the name of the school district, a PSD (for “public school district”) is used instead. Further, names of specific high schools have also been changed.

## CHAPTER 5

### FINDINGS 1: OPPOSITION TO GENDER DIVERSE POLICY

This chapter will detail findings identified in the public school district community meeting transcripts in relation to opposition to the proposed gender diverse school policy.<sup>10</sup> Comments and observations from participants in the townhall meetings will also be incorporated as supplemental and corroborating information. Several distinct common themes were found in the responses of 86 community members who opposed the policy, including, in order of frequency, *Rights vs. Rights*, *Religion/Morality*, *Biology*, *Safety/Fear*, and *Indifference* (see Appendix for diagram of themes). The following section will outline these themes, how they relate to social learning theory, and how they at times overlap with one another.

#### **Rights vs. Rights**

Out of the 86 community members who opposed the gender diverse policy, 64 expressed concern that their rights, as well as the rights of gender conforming students, would be violated as a result of the gender diverse policy. Many parents, for example, believed that this policy would undermine the values they teach or instill in their children, either by forcing students to accept gender diverse youth or imposing gender diverse curricula and language (i.e., pronouns) on students. One parent asserted, “As a mother, I have a God-given right to teach my children what I believe to be right and wrong” (PM4, CM24). Taking it further, another respondent inquired, “Why target our youth? Is it because, behind all this, there’s a hidden agenda to create a future of individuals that look like you do?” (PM3, CM15).

Respondents also worried that the policy would protect “one specific group” to the

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<sup>10</sup> Responses from those who were neutral/undecided were excluded from the findings, as there were very few participants in this category. Additionally, most responses were irrelevant to the social learning of gender normativity, as they pertained to the utility and effectiveness of the proposed policy.

detriment of other students. Specifically, many believed that the policy would violate gender conforming students' First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and religion. The use of pronouns and names corresponding to gender diverse students' identities was a particular cause for apprehension in this regard: "Will this policy protect freedom of speech of our students," asked one participant, "or will it compel teachers and students to use the preferred pronouns of a gender diverse student?" (PM3, CM15).

The opposing side also expressed concern that cisgender students would be disciplined, bullied, or otherwise mistreated for failing to agree with or follow the proposed policy. One mother inquired:

I ask you, who's going to be protecting my children if they are being bullied for their moral beliefs or if they call one of these kids by the wrong pronoun? Is there going to be a policy that will protect my children, as well? (PM1, CM10)

Another mother claimed that the policy:

...paves a path for those who do not hold the same morals and beliefs to be bullied by students and corrected by teachers, and we cannot create an environment where students are fearful of peacefully speaking about their beliefs, the things that they are taught... (PM1, CM14)

Moreover, a former student, concerned about the rights of his younger sister, asserted:

Just like my sister, I was raised in a home where the principles I live by are being violated through this policy. We believe a boy is a boy and a girl is a girl, and she would identify them as such... Forcing her to act against what she believes, and punishing her if she doesn't, is a violation of her freedom and rights. (PM3, CM17)

The responses that fall under this category are rife with concern from the opposing side that this

gender diverse policy will protect one particular group (i.e., gender diverse students) at the expense of others (i.e., cisgender students).

Contrary to fears expressed by these community members, TGNC youth do not seek special treatment. They simply wish to live authentically, safely, and comfortably, just as most cisgender students do. According to a townhall participant, the “perfect school day” (TH1, P3) would be one in which they would be able to hang out with friends, not be bullied or misgendered by staff or students, and have the ability to dress how they like. Nonetheless, the opposing side overwhelmingly cited concerns about their or their children’s rights as their primary opposition to the gender diverse policy.

Elements of social learning theory are evident in these responses. When respondents discuss freedom of speech, freedom of religion, or the First Amendment, for example, they are referring to perceived challenges to their rights to adhere to and perpetuate the gender normative values they have been taught. Social learning is especially apparent in statements which express a right to teach or instill values in one’s children. Due to its pervasiveness in this society, gender normativity has become a core value to many individuals, who in turn feel compelled to pass this value on to their children through reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Additionally, these responses demonstrate the power social learning has on perpetuating gender normativity, to the point that those in opposition appear to “other” the TGNC population. For example, many respondents rationalize using incorrect names or pronouns, something they would not do when interacting with gender conforming individuals, as a simple exercise of free speech. To many, gender normativity is so rational, so right, and so deeply embedded in their belief systems that to them, misgendering someone is not only acceptable, but a constitutional

right. Moreover, much of the language used by respondents, such as “force,” “impose,” and “hidden agenda” paint TGNC youth and their allies as adversaries on a nefarious mission to take away their rights and indoctrinate their children. This is one of the many negative consequences of gender normativity being perpetuated, through reciprocal determinism, for several generations (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Shaffer, 2009).

### **Religion/Morality**

Second only to concerns about rights, 54 community members cited their religious and/or moral values as a primary reason for their opposition to the gender diverse policy. Overlapping at times with the *Rights vs. Rights* theme, for example, some participants believed that the policy would force them or their children to adhere to standards and practices that directly violated their rights to freely practice their religious and moral values. “I am also opposed to this policy because I fear it interferes with my child’s first amendment right to religious liberty” (PM2, CM10), claimed a father of three.

Others, however, did not seem as concerned with rights per se, but merely pointed out their objections to the policy because it promoted viewpoints that they deemed morally unacceptable. “One of the things that concerns me,” asserts another parent, “is mandating that students call other students by words that quite frankly, up to this point, didn’t even exist. That’s a form of advocating that lifestyle that I am morally opposed to” (PM2, CM1). A student among the opposition expressed similar concerns: “I am against this policy because it goes against my beliefs and morals. I am not trying to disrespect anyone but when it comes to the education of me and my sisters, I will not stay quiet” (PM3, CM34). Many participants, such as this student, believed so much in their own morality that they frequently assured other community members that their intent was not to discriminate against or disrespect others. Another respondent claimed,

“I’m an advocate of treating everyone with respect, including people I disagree with” (PM4, CM21). This shame avoidance serves to absolve policy opposers of any responsibility to accept the TGNC population while, in their eyes, maintaining the strong moral fortitude that comes with adhering to the gender binary.

When expressing opposition to the proposed gender diverse policy, respondents frequently mentioned their moral and religious values, as well as those that they wished to instill in their children. This suggests that the pervasiveness of gender normativity is inextricably tied to religion, morality, and a sincere belief that adhering to the gender binary is simply the right way to live. It is difficult for those in opposition to immediately accept a policy that, from their perspective, calls their or their children’s morality, or rightness, into question. Many in attendance of these public meetings have not only learned gender normativity at a very young age, but also exhibit a motivation to continue adhering to this worldview, as they have been taught that this is a morally sound way to live (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Walters, 1963). Because of its ties to moral and religious values, several participants also expressed their intent to actively pass gender normativity on to others, particularly their children, through the social learning process of reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Shaffer, 2009).

## **Biology**

Following closely behind *Religion/Morality*, 51 community members expressed opposition to the policy due to the argument that one’s biological sex assigned at birth is also one’s gender. Further, respondents commonly invalidated the existence of TGNC individuals through their beliefs that gender identity is a choice not based in reality. For example, a self-identified concerned citizen asked, “Who has given kids the authority to decide whether they are

a boy or a girl, regardless of their biological gender?” (PM1, CM11). Another community member offered a particularly extreme comparison in his invalidation of TGNC identities: “What would happen if my child one day came to school and said that he was a horse? Are we going to accommodate [feelings] for horses?” (PM4, CM22). Some respondents cited scientific justifications for their beliefs, including one mother who claimed, “We can agree on math and science. We can agree that if you look at a cell in my body, it has two X chromosomes, and if you look at a man’s body, it has XY” (PM1, CM14). Others were not quite so overt in their statements regarding the conflation of biological sex and gender, but nonetheless expressed similar views. For example, a student voiced her concerns with the policy, asserting, “It’s not fair for a boy who decides to be a girl to enter a girls’ bathroom or locker room” (PM4, CM29).

Other participants implied that TGNC youth were simply confused about their gender identity, usually due to their young age: “There has been studies that prove that children go through different stages in the way they feel but after puberty, they go back to feeling normal, the way they should be” (PM4, CM22). Another participant wondered aloud why gender diverse children were allowed to “make such critical and serious decisions.” “We can also agree,” he claimed, “and science corroborates this, that a teenager’s brain, more specifically the frontal lobe, which is responsible for decision-making, doesn’t fully develop until about age 25” (PM1, CM11).

Regardless of established differences between biological sex and gender identity identified in recent literature (e.g., Ristori et al., 2020; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009), many in opposition to the policy conflate these two concepts. The idea that one’s sex assigned at birth is the same as one’s gender identity, along with strict adherence to the gender binary and its associated roles, has been culturally transmitted via social learning throughout this society’s

history (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Shaffer, 2009). As a result, many respondents, without considering the harm associated with misgendering someone or invalidating their identity, repeated rhetoric commonly directed toward the TGNC population: TGNC people are merely confused, or making an active decision to identify with a gender other than that assigned to them at birth.

Few participants incorporated research and evidence in their assertions. Those that did cited arguments pertaining to biological sex, chromosomes, and other concepts that often have no bearing on one's gender identity (Ristori et al., 2020; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Many parents on the opposing side openly discussed the gender normative values they are actively instilling in their children. Through verbal, live, and symbolic modeling, gender normativity is taught to countless children in how they are encouraged to dress, act, and play (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Shaffer, 2009; Spinner et al., 2018). It is evident that gender normative parents wholly expect their children to understand their gender identity at a young age, provided their children are cisgender and adhere to the gender binary. For those who subscribe entirely to the gender normative values they have been taught and wish to pass on, the gender diverse policy challenges deeply-held gender normative assumptions about sex and gender that will be difficult to upend with the mere introduction of inclusive policy.

### **Safety/Fear**

Half of the opposing community members (43) cited fear and safety concerns as justification for their opposition to the gender diverse policy. Respondents were especially fearful of TGNC individuals entering traditionally gender-segregated areas, such as restrooms, locker rooms, and hotel rooms on overnight field trips. Many expressed concerns that their children's privacy and comfort would be violated by this policy. "As far as my daughter is

concerned,” a mother and teacher from the opposing side proclaimed, “she is a very timid young girl. I am extremely opposed that at that age, her having to be exposed to naked boys in the bathrooms and in the locker rooms” (PM1, CM8). Others were fearful that the policy would lead to cisgender students, particularly females, being attacked or sexually assaulted. One parent stated:

When people ask me, “Why are you concerned that your children are not safe at school?” Let me tell you. I don't want my girl to be in the bathroom with a boy because sometimes, uh, this will lead to different things. (PM4, CM35)

Another parent asked:

What about when teachers become transgenders? Are there going to be male teachers in with my daughter or my granddaughter? That should be the concern of the government. With all of the sexual allegations that are happening right now in our world today, I think that should be a consideration of thought. (PM2, CM11)

Underpinning many of the responses in the *Safety/Fear* category is the commonly cited rhetoric that depicts the TGNC population as dangerous or predatory (see Buist & Stone, 2014; Stone, 2018). This rhetoric stems from the pervasiveness of gender normativity. For generations, people have been taught that gender transgressions are wrong or immoral. As such, gender diverse individuals have historically been viewed as deviant, deceptive predators, particularly when entering gender segregated spaces (Biegel, 2018; Buist & Stone, 2014; Stone, 2018).

Respondents who opposed the policy easily and openly discussed the fear they had for their or their children's safety, with little regard for the harmful rhetoric they perpetuated. This demonstrates that they believed they were in the right, having something substantive to fear from TGNC youth who simply wish to use the facilities corresponding to their gender.

Overlapping with the *Biology* theme, opposers specifically cited fear of the “boy in the girls’ bathroom.” Through the cultural transmission of gender normativity, respondents were taught that a child who was assigned male at birth *is* a boy, and boys—particularly boys who “think they are girls”—do not belong in the girls’ restroom.

### **Indifference**

Among community members who opposed the gender diverse policy, 24 exhibited a dismissive mindset concerning the rights and unique needs of TGNC students. Their lack of interest in or concern for gender diverse students seeking equity in school settings underscored the indifference they displayed toward this population. For example, several people failed to see the utility of a policy that specifically included gender diverse students because of a blanket anti-bullying policy already in existence. One participant claimed, “There is already an existing and appropriate anti-bullying policy. There is no need for a new policy, especially one that seeks to protect this special interest group. All bullying is bad and is already covered in the current policy” (PM2, CM7). A mother who was strongly opposed to the gender diverse policy asserted, “PSD already has an anti-bullying policy that protects all children. If this is not being enforced, then you are failing at doing your job. I’m not” (PM3, CM27). Respondents also displayed such indifference in comments such as:

As a former PSD student, I also experienced bullying when I first arrived to this country because I didn't speak the language. Later, because of my accent. I had to deal with it by myself. I didn't demand any special treatment but I had to work harder to learn the language in stride in school. (PM4, CM24)

Responses falling under this category demonstrate marked indifference toward the unique issues and needs faced by TGNC youth. Participants exhibited a failure to acknowledge the importance

of a novel gender diverse policy, which is needed because historically, gender diversity has not been considered in school settings. The bullying and discrimination faced by gender diverse students simply does not look like other, more typical forms of bullying acknowledged in blanket school policies (Airton et al., 2019; Biegel, 2018; Taylor & Peter, 2011).

Importantly to note, the debated PSD policy outlines clear guidelines on how to accommodate and protect gender diverse students. Pronoun usage, bathroom/locker room access, field trip accommodations, and respecting the anonymity of students who are not yet out to everyone are among many examples of inclusivity and protection that are crucial to the wellbeing of TGNC youth, but have scarcely been prioritized on a school or even societal level (Biegel, 2018).

Where might such indifference come from, and how does social learning play a role? It is likely that the prevalence of gender normativity, this belief that one's gender identity must match one's sex assigned at birth, has long oversimplified the issue. The parents, teachers, and community members in opposition to the policy have never had to consider gender diversity, and this policy challenges their firmly established beliefs. Moreover, the policy, in their eyes, introduces unwanted complications in their status quo, forcing them and their children to confront what they have been taught about sex and gender. Without any clear motivation to re-examine their worldview, which is also intertwined with their own sense of morality and rightness, it will be difficult to disrupt the gender normative beliefs they adhere to through the simple introduction of the gender diverse policy alone, regardless of the equity and inclusivity it may bring (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Walters, 1963).

The following chapter will reflect further on the harms posed by gender normative ideology, as well as the insufficiency of policy alone in disrupting this pervasive culture. Themes

identified among supporters present at the public school district meetings will outline what may be needed— beyond gender inclusive policies—to improve safety and quality of life for TGNC students through a cultural shift of genuine acceptance.

## CHAPTER 6

### FINDINGS 2: SUPPORT FOR GENDER DIVERSE POLICY

This chapter will cover findings identified in comments from supporters of the proposed PSD gender diverse school policy. When applicable, the perspectives and comments from townhall participants will be included to supplement and corroborate these findings. Four common themes were found in the responses of 90 supporting community members. In order of frequency, these themes include: *Inclusive Policy*, *Safety/Fear*, *Acceptance/Affirmation*, and *Religion/Morality* (see Appendix for diagram of themes). The following section will discuss these themes, their relation to social learning theory, and how they occasionally overlap with one another.

#### **Inclusive Policy**

Of the 90 community members on the supporting side, 64 cited the importance of and dire need for an inclusive gender diverse school policy. For gender diverse youth, inclusion signifies safety, equity in treatment by school staff, access to facilities that align with their gender identity and expression, and the right to be called by names and pronouns that correspond with their identities. In other words, inclusive policy is intended to allow TGNC youth to authentically exist on school grounds without fear of discrimination, marginalization, and victimization. For example, a supportive foster mom claimed, “I firmly believe that this policy will protect all children in our schools, and enhance the learning and ensure a safe environment for all children, despite their gender identity” (PM1, CM26). According to another participant, a mother of a transgender child:

Kids just want to be kids, and should have the right to be kids... All kids should have the same basic right to have access to a restroom, locker room, dorm room, and be identified

by the gender that they identify with. (PM4, CM9)

As a counter to those who believed the policy would result in special treatment or violations of their rights, she added, “We have passed laws that protect the rights of African Americans, women, people with limited disabilities, and many other groups to protect their basic human rights. There is no difference for trans kids” (PM4, CM9). Other participants discussed the policy’s importance in providing clear guidelines pertaining to accommodating and protecting TGNC youth: “I read the proposed policy line-by-line,” asserted one participant, “I see it as clear guidance that would assist teachers, staff, and parents in navigating the how-to in demonstrating respect and support of our gender diverse students” (PM1, CM30).

Responses falling under the *Inclusive Policy* category demonstrate one way in which social learning could be used as a vehicle for disrupting gender normativity. Through an inclusive gender diverse policy, it could be argued that gender normativity is challenged through both verbal and live modeling. Verbally, such policies state that gender diverse students are entitled to be called by their preferred names and pronouns, as well as access to facilities corresponding to their gender identity. Through live modeling, gender diverse students are subsequently allowed to carry on with their lives openly and authentically, with no disruption or infringement on the rights of other students. In both cases, inclusive policy serves to normalize TGNC youth in the eyes of their peers and school staff. While it remains questionable that inclusive policy will alter gender normative beliefs in parents who are determined to live by the gender binary, it may shift the perspectives of many students and staff who share space with and get to know TGNC youth on a day-to-day basis (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Swank & Ruiz, 2010).

### **Safety/Fear**

Among policy supporters, 43 responses fell under the *Safety/Fear* category. Respondents frequently discussed the dangers and fears faced by TGNC youth at school, including their higher risk of victimization and bullying as well as feeling generally unsafe in the absence of a policy outlining how to protect them. A self-proclaimed ally and mother on the supporting side asserted:

I think it's really important here that we talk about these policies; that we get less involved in the beliefs and the moral background that we can squabble over and more involved in talking about the safety of our children. 60% of LGBT youth in school feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation. 28% have been bullied in bathrooms. 32% have been bullied in gym classes. I could read you this whole page of statistics, but it's out there that we need an additional policy in order to protect these students. (PM1, CM38)

Comments such as this corroborate prior research outlining the higher risk of victimization faced by TGNC youth, as well as the fear many of them feel on school grounds (see Kosciw et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2010).

A member of a clinical team at a local non-profit organization expressed similar concerns for the safety of gender diverse youth: "Gender diverse students pose no risk to other students and are at a greater risk of bullying and harassment than their cisgender peers" (PM4, CM5). Further, some LGBTQ community members confirmed the fear and safety risks this population faces at school. One respondent claimed, "My experience in PSD as a gay man was one of ridicule, fights, and fear. These types of experiences are far more dangerous and amplified for gender diverse students" (PM2, CM27).

Corroborating responses from supporters in the public school district community

meetings, townhall participants also described feeling unsafe on campus due to the discrimination and victimization they faced. “We don’t feel safe. Like, ever” (TH1, P2), explained one respondent. Participants claimed that they would outright avoid going to the restroom at school, particularly when large groups were present, as they feared being victimized. One participant described using the restroom in the nurse’s office to avoid trouble. These experiences correspond with prior research outlining the danger and fear that many gender diverse and queer youth feel on school grounds as a result of harmful gender normative beliefs and rhetoric (Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018).

Many public school district community meeting participants also included counterarguments to those in the *Safety/Fear* category of the opposing side, namely in reference to the bathroom and locker room debate that had so many fearing for the safety of their cisgender children. One university researcher stated:

The person most likely to experience violence in the bathroom is actually the trans person. No, not the cisgender person. We have little to no records showing that the circumstances that everyone is afraid of about boys pretending to be girls sneaking into the girls’ restrooms. We have no data that actually shows that but we do have a lot of data showing trans people getting chased or assaulted inside of bathrooms. (PM3, CM34)

Speaking directly to those in opposition to the policy, another community member asserted, “For those amongst us who only get their primary information from internet/gossip: trans children are not predators. In fact, they are victims of predators” (PM3, CM40).

In some cases, members of the transgender community spoke up on behalf of themselves and gender diverse students to counter the opposition. For example, this respondent claimed, “I’m a transgender male. There are a lot of things that I am. I am not a criminal. I am not a

pedophile. I am *not* a predator. Neither are these children” (PM2, CM25). It is evident from such responses that many community members not only wished to express concern and advocate for gender diverse youth, but also aimed to dispel the harmful rhetoric surrounding TGNC youth by appealing to opposing community members present at the public meetings.

When respondents discuss how they or TGNC students they know are disproportionately victimized or fear for their safety at school, they are referring to an unfortunate product of the social learning of gender normativity. The criminalization of TGNC youth, or the belief that they are deviant or abnormal due to their failure to conform to gender normative standards, poses real safety risks to this population. They are more likely to be victimized because of this socially learned worldview that they are morally abhorrent or predatory (Biegel, 2018; Buist & Stone, 2014; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Shaffer, 2009; Stone, 2018).

### **Acceptance/Affirmation**

While responses falling under this category often overlap with *Inclusive Policy*, it is nonetheless included as a separate theme due to its broad focus on genuine acceptance and affirmation of TGNC youths’ gender identities, beyond the confines of a policy that mandates inclusion. Among community members who supported the policy, 42 discussed the importance of such acceptance, citing benefits to the TGNC population’s health and wellbeing as well as the consequences of failing to accept gender diverse youth. One mother with experience in raising a bullied child expressed such concerns to the audience:

In my other life, I am the owner of a funeral home, and I would like to say that I am begging [this] County to implement [the policy], as seeing dozens of suicides of young people because they can’t live authentic lives. I think it’s more important that we don’t hide our differences, but we teach our differences. (PM1, CM35)

A community member who identified as a transgender male also discussed the negative consequences of living with unsupportive families and communities who perpetuate gender normative values, as well as the importance of living authentically:

I hated my body from the time I was five years old... I felt myself to be a bad person because I was taught through my parents, through people, that I could be a freak... When I turned 18, I left my parents and left all those dresses and the female stuff that I had to endure and tolerated over so many years. And I came out at 18 and I began my hormones and got my mastectomy and I was happy. (PM3, CM38)

Several other supporters cited the significance of taking the time to get to know gender diverse children to promote genuine acceptance. A supportive mother proclaimed:

So, I myself, as a mother of four, have been blessed to really know a transgender child. And my request is that all of you that have so much fear, just like every other parent that ever has been, *please* get to know a child, and a parent, and a family that loves and wants to protect their transgender child, just as you do. (PM2, CM40)

Comments such as these signify the negative consequences associated with harmful gender normative beliefs, as well as the fear and misinformation that leads to the rejection of gender diverse youth. Conversely, they underscore the importance of legitimate acceptance of this population, which may largely be achieved through taking time to get to know TGNC youth.

Taking it further, some respondents cited current research as justification for accepting and affirming gender diverse identities. A few participants explained the mental health, social, and academic benefits of acceptance and inclusion, while others, countering some participants on the opposing side, discussed scientific justifications. For example, this transgender program manager discussed biological reasons for gender variance: “You can look up Klinefelter’s, you

can look up androgen insensitivity syndrome. There are lots of DNA reasons, I mean biological reasons that people are the way that they are... I encourage you to look up your scientific facts” (PM1, CM27).

Like *Inclusive Policy*, the acceptance and affirmation of TGNC youth may have important implications for the disruption of gender normativity via verbal and live modeling, but with greater overall capacity to produce long-term societal change. If enough individuals were to participate in genuine, open acceptance of gender diverse youth, both on and off school grounds, this could result in more TGNC youth feeling comfortable expressing themselves and living authentically. In turn, through reciprocal determinism, others may find themselves rejecting the harmful aspects of gender normativity and practicing the ever-increasing acceptance of gender diverse individuals (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963).

Perhaps most importantly, some community members urged others to take the time to get to know and understand TGNC youth, to look past the rhetoric and misinformation and see that they are just children. Through active association with gender diverse students, this social learning process serves to humanize and normalize them in the eyes of those who see gender diversity as a threat to their rights, morals, and safety (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Swank & Ruiz, 2010).

Further emphasizing the utility of acceptance and affirmation in combating the greater gender normative culture, townhall participants discussed the limitations of gender inclusive policies in improving the lives of TGNC youth. By the time the townhall meetings were conducted, the PSD gender diverse policy had recently been passed. Few participants were previously aware of this policy, as well as the protections afforded to gender diverse students with its passing. Furthermore, most respondents believed that the policy did little to improve

experiences at school, as there was virtually no difference between gender diverse student experiences before and after the policy's implementation. This suggests that inclusive policy, while an incredibly important step in the disruption of gender normativity, is not sufficient on its own to combat deep-seated issues caused by the cultural transmission of gender normative beliefs.

The townhall participants also reflected on why they believed the policy was not sufficient. As one respondent claimed, “[They] can change the law, but can’t change people’s mindsets” (TH1, P1). The mistreatment of TGNC youth often goes unchecked at school due to a lack of response from staff. As such, participants described feelings of alienation and unimportance resulting from staff failures to intervene in instances of harassment and bullying. “People aren’t inclusive because it doesn’t affect them personally” (TH1, P2), asserted another community member. This demonstrates the prominence of gender normativity, and how generations of its cultural transmission have led to indifference and lack of consideration from staff as well as unabashed discrimination and victimization from cisgender peers.

The importance of acceptance and affirmation in the lives of TGNC youth is underscored by what occurs in its absence; a cycle of peer abuse that staff and teachers largely fail to address. Townhall participants’ responses thus corroborated the resistance to gender diverse policy that was evident in the public school district transcripts; without genuine efforts to include and accept TGNC youth, the mere implementation of a policy will do very little to improve their experiences.

### **Religion/Morality**

While fewer community members on the supporting side discussed religion or morality (16) than those on the opposing side, a considerable number of respondents countered opposers

with their own religious and moral imperatives. A pastor, for example, cited her religious beliefs in support of the policy: “I am here for humanity. And how we advanced is not just tolerance or commendation; we advanced by acceptance. God said, love Him and neighbor, and that's what we need to do” (PM2, CM42). A supportive father, in response to religious people on the opposing side, claimed, “As a Christian I can only say that God has taught me to love everybody, and I don’t understand how we can say that being a Christian is about excluding people or hating people or disregarding somebody’s desires to live their life” (PM3, CM43). Another participant proclaimed, “As a Christian with moral values who grew up in a conservative household, I’m in full support of this [policy]” (PM2, CM33).

While the *Religion/Morality* theme was an unexpected finding, it is, perhaps, one of the most significant themes when considering the disruption of gender normativity via social learning. If religion and morality are among the primary reasons people continue to cling to gender normative values and the rejection of TGNC youth, enough exposure to more positive biblical messages (e.g., God loves everybody) could potentially tip the scales in favor of TGNC acceptance. Through verbal modeling (e.g., explaining God’s message of love and acceptance as right and moral), as well as live modeling among progressive religious leaders and followers who display favorable viewpoints toward the TGNC population, harmful gender normative values may be disrupted through a general message of love and acceptance (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963).

To truly understand the negative consequences of gender normativity, as well as what may be necessary to foster a greater culture of acceptance and affirmation, it is crucial to include the perspectives of gender diverse and queer community members. The following chapter will supplement the findings of the public school district meetings by detailing such perspectives

from the townhall participants, who share their experiences in navigating hostile, gender normative school climates and offer suggestions on how to improve such environments.

## CHAPTER 7

### FINDINGS 3: EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE

In any discussion about the harms of gender normativity and how to combat this culture, it is advantageous to include input from gender diverse and queer members of the community, who have experience in traversing hostile, gender normative school climates. Through townhall participant reflections on school experiences and suggestions for improving school and work environments for queer-identified and gender diverse students, the following chapter will include such perspectives. Findings outlined in this chapter will serve as supplemental information to the public school district transcript findings highlighted in Chapters 5 and 6 above. Elements of social learning in participants' responses will also be detailed.

#### **Reflecting on School Experiences**

The participants extensively discussed their experiences at school—either previous junior high and/or high schools, or current colleges and/or universities—which were overwhelmingly negative. This section will include their descriptions of such experiences, including bullying, differential staff treatment, difficulties reporting bullying as a result of such treatment, and the negative mental health consequences that resulted. However, the community members also recalled positive aspects of school and work, including the safe spaces and people that helped mitigate the negative impacts of the dominant gender normative culture. The following sections will outline these experiences.

#### **Bullying.**

Community members from the townhall meetings described being bullied by their peers, not necessarily in college, but in public school, which one group member described as “harmful and damaging” (TH2, P4). Corroborating prior research, most of the experiences described were

verbal in nature, which teachers and staff did not take as seriously as physical victimization (Kosciw et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2010). Even though many participants faced harmful verbal abuse, such as peers calling them homophobic slurs and telling them to “kill yourself,” staff rarely intervened. One participant described a frustrating cycle of victimization that occurred roughly fifteen times per year: TGNC students were verbally abused in art class, causing the teacher to send the perpetrators to the dean’s office. However, the offending students would simply be sent back to class ten minutes later.

Some group members also described staff attempts to mediate conflicts between perpetrators and victims. These efforts were described as unhelpful, since participants did not want to discuss issues with their bullies face to face, nor compromise with them in any way. According to one respondent, the bullies wished to keep bullying while the victims wished for it to stop. There is no “little bit of bullying” (TH2, P7) and no middle ground in such situations, making attempts at mediation entirely ineffective.

In the absence of effective staff intervention, the community members described tactics they used to avoid bullying, such as switching classes and avoiding school-sanctioned events (e.g., sporting events). Participants claimed they didn’t care about such events because of the negative experiences they endured. Comments such as these exemplify the fear and lack of belonging many TGNC youth feel in school due to the mistreatment they endure on a regular basis (Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018). When bullying or verbal abuse inevitably occurred, the participants explained that they tended to stick with their typical group of queer kids for protection. They did not usually resort to violence, but instead ignored bullies or told them to “fuck off” (TH2, P6) together. One participant described a “silent, protective state”

(TH2, P3) that they maintained in the face of opposition. A discussion about “T-posing”<sup>11</sup> ensued, in which some respondents explained the importance of filling space to ward off bullies. The solidarity described by participants demonstrates how they navigated oppression as a group, fostering their own culture of acceptance and affirmation in the absence of inclusivity in the greater, gender normative community.

Participants also went into detail about who the bullies were in school. The biggest bullies, they claimed, were young “popular girls”; “engineering kids,” who acted smarter or superior to others; “jocks”; members of the football team; “dance kids”; “rich kids”; “cheerleaders”; “popular kids”; and “insecure kids.” The wide variety of bullies described by participants underscores gender normativity’s pervasiveness, although the general trend of bullies participating in gender normative activities, such as football and dance, was evident in both townhalls.

Throughout these conversations, participants also discussed the difference between being bullied and being victimized. Many believed that the term “bullying” was insufficient to fully encompass their experiences. They agreed that bullying is downplayed, often treated like a “soft word” (TH2, P4) to describe any number of different altercations. There is a difference, claimed one participant, between schoolyard bullies who tease others and steal lunch money and those who make TGNC students feel as though they “want to die” (TH2, P1). It was agreed that some situations would more accurately be described as assault or abuse.

It is clear from both townhalls as well as the public school district community meetings that bullying and victimization, as well as the lack of staff intervention in such instances, are major barriers to TGNC youth feeling safe, included, and validated at school. The importance of

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<sup>11</sup> Participants described and physically demonstrated the concept of “T-posing,” in which one stands with their arms horizontally outstretched in order to appear more confident and assertive when confronted by bullies.

following through with gender inclusive policies, as well as promoting a greater culture of acceptance and understanding of the unique issues faced by this population, cannot be overstated. The following section will describe in further detail the differential treatment townhall participants experienced at the hands of school staff and administration.

### **Differential staff treatment.**

Consistent with prior research, participants in both townhalls extensively discussed differential treatment and discrimination at the hands of school staff (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Palmer & Greytak, 2017). Most instances described by the community members entailed differential enforcement of zero tolerance bullying policies, which often resulted in them being punished instead of the perpetrators. According to one respondent, their conservative school administration, who were “bullies themselves” (TH1, P2), showed preferential treatment to sports teams, cheerleaders, and popular students, who were generally allowed to discriminate against gender diverse youth with little consequence.

Differential enforcement of dress codes was also discussed. The participants described gender normative dress code policies that disproportionately targeted girls as well as TGNC youth who did not conform to gender normative standards of dress. One participant recalled a noteworthy exception, however: Cheerleaders were not only allowed, but at times required to wear their uniforms during class, despite the fact that the skirts were shorter than what is normally permitted in the dress code. This further emphasizes the discriminatory treatment experienced by TGNC youth, who are often punished for simply failing to adhere to the gender binary in how they present at school (Glickman, 2016).

The discrimination and disproportionate punishment outlined by participants was a considerable source of stress for them, as it caused them to feel marginalized and lose valuable

class time. In spite of the existence of inclusive policy, it is apparent that socially learned gender normative values continue to influence school staff and administration, who consistently demonstrate preferential treatment to gender conforming students (Glickman, 2016; Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Palmer & Greytak, 2017).

### **Fear of/difficulty reporting.**

Participants felt there was little that could be done about the negative experiences they faced at school, primarily due to difficulties in reporting their experiences to school officials. Because zero tolerance policies were differentially enforced, participants believed that reporting would either accomplish nothing or result in punishment for them. Several also described fear of being outed as a barrier to reporting victimization. Not all of the participants were out to others, including parents and family members, whom they feared would be notified by staff if they reported bullying.

According to participants, one particular effort to ensure anonymity, a mobile app that allows students to report instances of bullying without identifying themselves, was also ineffective, and at times seen as a joke among students. Participants expressed concern that this form of reporting was not truly anonymous, as some level of cooperation with victims is needed to follow through with reports. Additionally, they claimed, even if staff did not necessarily know who reported an incident, the perpetrators likely would, which may have resulted in retaliation for reporting them.

While anonymity concerning students' gender identities is addressed in the PSD gender diverse policy, it is clear that this is still a salient concern among the townhall participants. This indicates that despite the policy, many school administrators do not comprehend the importance of gender diverse youth being able to come out on their own terms, when they feel it is safe to do

so. Corresponding with indifference displayed by the opposing side during the public school district community meetings, the social learning and pervasiveness of gender normativity has resulted in a failure among school officials to consider the unique issues concerning TGNC youth, such as fear of being outed.

### **Mental health.**

Additionally, participants described the mental health issues, namely depression and anxiety, that they experienced due to being discriminated against and bullied. Along with the difficulties of living with such mental health problems, participants discussed the academic trouble (e.g., missing school) they faced as a result. A lack of effective response from staff to assist with these problems was cited as a major barrier to their wellbeing. The community members discussed how staff, counselors, and teachers lacked general awareness of and training to help them with mental health problems related to their gender identity and expression. This underscores the need for gender inclusive policy that provides clear guidelines for assisting TGNC youth, as traditional gender normative approaches are largely ineffective and contribute to the disproportionate levels of mental health issues faced by TGNC youth (Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018).

### **Safe spaces/safe people.**

Participants extensively discussed the importance of safe spaces, or places where they felt safe and comfortable enough to be themselves, free from discrimination and victimization. Unfortunately, having access to such spaces was, at times, extremely difficult for gender diverse students. One such example was an art room mentioned by participants, which was described as a “queer hub” for approximately 45 students who, with the art teacher’s blessing, would often eat lunch and spend time there. This space was described as being bright, welcoming, and adorned

with a pride flag that designated it as an area for queer youth to safely gather and interact. Unfortunately, the administration intervened, citing a rule against eating in classrooms that, according to participants, was not enforced elsewhere. Students were eventually forced back into the overcrowded, less welcoming cafeteria, while other students, such as the “Mormon kids,” were allegedly allowed to keep their space. Participants believed this was a deliberate effort to deprive queer students of safe spaces. “We’re not even in their space, and they’re kicking us out of ours” (TH1, P2), claimed one respondent.

While some participants in townhall 2 also claimed that at times, there were simply no safe spaces to go, others outlined various spaces they utilized at school to eat lunch or get away when things were not going well. These included various clubs and classrooms, such as film, art, and history clubs, as well as a supportive teacher’s classroom. The participants also agreed that it was the people in these spaces, their peers and supportive staff and teachers, that made them feel safe. Additionally, the group discussed the importance of restrooms as safe spaces. Participants agreed that restrooms were not always safe for TGNC people who do not “pass” as the gender with which they identify. Thus, many of them preferred single-stall or family restrooms where they could escape during difficult times. One participant described how they would go to the restroom when they were experiencing panic attacks, claiming that they were “either disassociating or in the bathroom” (TH2, P1).

As many of these participants were young adults and out of high school, safe spaces at work and at university/college were also discussed. These included workplaces that were openly accepting of the LGBTQ community, where employers at times wore pride shirts. Inclusive work policies also made participants feel safe, such as environments where “boys can wear skirts” (TH2, P2) or places with gender neutral dress codes. “If everyone wears khakis, no one can

discriminate” (TH2, P3), explained one respondent. Further emphasizing the importance of inclusive clubs outlined in prior research, another participant brought up their community college as a safe space, as it had a gender-sexuality alliance (GSA) club as well as a multicultural center (Kosciw et al., 2013; Singh, 2013).

In their quest for greater acceptance and affirmation, participants in townhall 1 cited the Internet and social media as salient parts of their lives. While they did not deny that there were negative aspects of the online experience (e.g., cyber bullying, negative stories), they agreed that the positives outweighed the negatives. Participants described how the Internet is an important space for LGBTQ+ youth to connect with others who are experiencing similar issues. It also, they claimed, provided them with important gender diverse knowledge and resources they were not able to receive at home or school. Moreover, through Internet and social media, the participants enjoyed access to uplifting and inspiring stories.

The Internet and social media have the potential to provide virtual safe spaces for TGNC youth who lack support at home and school. Additionally, they may prove crucial to the disruption of gender normativity, as the social learning of TGNC acceptance may occur at a much faster rate via virtual means than through school policy and family/peer acceptance alone. Through rapid information sharing, access to live and symbolic models, and the ability to foster connections with other gender diverse youth across the world, TGNC youth are able to participate in an inclusive and accepting online environment that they, through reciprocal determinism, could then model to others at home and school (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963).

The consensus among participants was that they preferred to be surrounded by accepting, affirming people in environments free from hostility, where they could unwind and escape from

the pressures of school and work. Moreover, the discussions about restrooms underscore the fact that inclusive policy alone does not make students feel safer in these spaces, particularly if they do not “pass.” While the PSD policy allows gender diverse students access to spaces that correspond with their identities, without a culture of acceptance and affirmation, these policies will do very little to help students feel safe. Until gender normativity is disrupted and TGNC youth are openly included and accepted, many of these students will continue to rely on nurse’s restrooms, single-stall restrooms, and other spaces that shield them from the hardships they face due to their identities. For the time being, safe spaces are crucial in giving students reprieve from the systematic mistreatment and isolation they experience (Kosciw, 2013; Singh, 2013; Zeeman et al., 2017).

Participants also described a general lack of supportive, safe people in their lives. With the exception of supportive mothers, who would advocate on behalf of some respondents when they were having difficulties in school, family support was not extensively discussed. The community members also agreed that very few teachers, administrators, and peers were accepting and supportive. However, participants from both townhalls discussed in detail the teachers, staff, peers, and friends who did make school more bearable for them.

Despite negative treatment from most staff members, participants noted that some teachers and staff were very helpful and accepting. Both groups overwhelmingly agreed that “cool teachers” were one of the greatest aspects of their time on campus. Teachers with “cool personalities,” who were supportive, helpful, good at their jobs, and who did not discriminate against students made school more enjoyable and learning easier. The aforementioned art teacher who allowed access to her classroom was one such example, as was a new dean who went out of her way to assist students, actively asking how she could assist them. Teachers who check in

were also praised by participants. These discussions, as well as prior literature, emphasize the importance of positive adults who, through verbal and live modeling, encourage an accepting and affirming environment for gender diverse youth as well as others (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018). Supportive staff thus has the potential to play a key role in the disruption of gender normativity.

A discussion also emerged in which participants described who the “cool kids” were in school. Community members claimed that they “love weird art kids” (TH2, P5); some theater students, who were described as either “great or not great” (TH2, P4); and photography students. Participants among both townhalls emphasized the arts, particularly students and teachers involved in such studies, as crucial to queer acceptance and affirmation.

Additionally, respondents described the peer support they gave to and received from other queer students in a process of checking in with one another and at times, “carrying [one another’s] trauma” (TH1, P1) when they were not supported at home. The discussion about safe people in townhall 2 evolved into a particularly noteworthy conversation about peers the participants shared space with at school, as well as their relationship with other gender diverse students in their quest for safety and acceptance. The participants described their peers as “allies,” not necessarily friends, but “friendly people,” “comrades,” people with which to “share intel,” and fellow “spies.”

One community member designated their overall school experience as “The Battle,” in which they and their peers, with an “us against the administration or the bourgeoisie” mentality, looked out for one another. They likened their place on campus to that of “rebels,” “outsiders,” “anarchists,” and “communists,” generally depicting themselves as against the grain or norm (TH2, P4). Another participant described the experience as “trauma bonding,” in which peers

provided “mutual aid” to one another in the face of the hardships they experienced (TH2, P3).

The group agreed that this sense of community and belonging was crucial, because isolation was harmful and led to participants getting in their own heads.

These discussions emphasize the social learning of gender normativity, which has historically dominated society to the point that those who do not conform are seen as, and indeed see themselves as, rebels and outsiders. In the absence of having a place in conventional society, gender diverse students who lack the motivation required to learn gender normativity band together with like-minded, valued peers. The protection, validation, and acceptance offered in these peer groups is seen as beneficial, leading to the social learning of new norms and values that the group shares. Such groups also have the potential to foster a culture of TGNC acceptance, provided they continue to grow and their members actively interact with gender conforming peers (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Swank & Ruiz, 2010).

The importance of safe people in the lives of TGNC youth cannot be overstated, as they are crucial in the fight for increased acceptance and affirmation of this population. Staff, parents, and peers who model support and inclusivity have the potential to disrupt gender normativity through their words and actions, promoting the social learning of a more accepting culture for TGNC and queer youth through reciprocal determinism (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963).

### **Participant Insight and Suggestions**

The townhall meetings concluded with opportunities for the participants to offer suggestions and insight concerning school policy and their overall academic experiences. The community members revisited the topics of bullying and safe spaces, providing

recommendations on how they believed these issues might be improved. Additionally, they discussed their previous inability to effect change in school because their needs were not taken seriously by staff and teachers. The following section will entail the recommendations offered by participants, who are uniquely situated to provide insight based on firsthand experiences navigating hostile school climates.

Townhall participants, particularly those in the second group, discussed in detail what should be done about bullying, and whether they believed things could be improved. Many short-term suggestions were offered, including the possibility of student “protection committees” (TH2, P8) to mitigate bullying. It was also agreed that school administrators should stop punishing the ones being bullied and equally enforce zero tolerance policies, a salient concern among participants across both townhalls. Attempts to raise awareness of bullying were also discussed among participants, including an anti-bullying club at one’s previous school, in which members put up posters and handed out pins. Assemblies with anti-bullying themes were offered as a suggestion by another participant. However, some in the group dismissed such campaign efforts, claiming that many students saw assemblies as jokes, and that the messages were no more than fads that did not result in any real behavioral change.

Further, some community members believed that bullying would not improve without “fundamental changes in society” (TH2, P4). Others offered more long-term solutions to accomplish these changes, such as thorough education on what constitutes bullying and why it is harmful. Suggestions for raising awareness in a more holistic way was touched upon, with participants and facilitators discussing the incorporation of mental health and the cycle of violence into educational efforts. The group also discussed potential mottos for raising awareness. “Hurt people hurt people,” suggested one participant, “but hurt people can help

people.” This community member also claimed that school communities should “spread kindness” (TH2, P8). Another believed that to mitigate bullying, schools needed to “foster a connection between people” (TH2, P9), with a caveat that this should not be required for victims who would rather not communicate with their perpetrators.

A few respondents believed that bullies should also receive more attention, as there may be something deeper going on in their lives that causes them to lash out at others. There was a consensus that there should be a way for bullies to receive help, whether it be mental health interventions or investigations into whether they were being abused at home. Some community members, however, believed that bullies needed harsher punishments, including mandatory videos on the harms of bullying, essays, or community service so they could be held accountable, learn from their mistakes, and do something good for the community.

In light of the danger and fear the participants endured in school, safe spaces were a major priority, particularly for those attending the first townhall meeting. Some respondents wanted the art room reinstated as a safe space, as well as many additional spaces and inclusive clubs for gender diverse and queer students. One participant explained that there were many clubs at their school, “but only one for us” (TH1, P2), in reference to a small LGBTQ club run by a teacher described as lesbian-identified. Participants across both townhalls expressed a general desire for safer, more inclusive school environments, including suggestions such as equal enforcement of zero tolerance policies and lifts on restroom restrictions.

The community members also believed that TGNC and queer students need more support from teachers and school staff. Their personal experiences included prior attempts at petitions and pleading their cases to administrators, which were largely ignored or shut down. This made the participants cynical about gender diverse students’ ability to advocate for themselves and

effect change. Supportive teachers as well as adult advocates and representatives, whose purpose would be to ensure that student concerns are heard and gender diverse policies are enforced, were discussed among participants and facilitators of both groups as potential solutions. Queer student organizations were also considered among group members and facilitators. Provided such efforts would be handled well and efficiently, with the assistance of adult advocates, participants believed this would be a viable solution for ensuring that students receive the representation they need. Respondents also suggested more staff training regarding LGBTQ students and mental health, including the possibility of introducing a third-party counselor to assist with such training. This would help ensure that gender diverse students would have their needs and concerns effectively addressed by a more knowledgeable and empathetic staff.

It is apparent from participants' responses that despite the implementation of the gender diverse policy, the needs of TGNC and queer students are not being properly addressed. Suggestions for preventing bullying were discussed, along with the importance of implementing more safe spaces for gender diverse students. Community members additionally discussed the need for greater school involvement among gender diverse students, their need to be heard, and the significance of equitable and compassionate treatment from school staff. Adult advocates and representatives, whose purpose would be to help students navigate hostile school environments and educate staff on the needs of gender diverse youth, were also considered. These noteworthy suggestions from the participants have the potential to further facilitate the disruption of gender normativity, which remains a major barrier for TGNC youth who simply want inclusivity, comfort, and safety at school.

In addition to these valuable recommendations, some community members touched upon broader societal issues that correspond with the social learning of gender normativity. While

improvements to and enforcement of existing policies are absolutely essential to the wellbeing of TGNC youth, this is unlikely to occur without the “fundamental changes in society” (TH2, P4) addressed by one of the participants. In this case, the fundamental change that is needed is the disruption of gender normativity that, as evidenced by the public school district meetings as well as the townhalls, continues to be perpetuated via social learning in the United States.

The following discussion chapter will include answers to the research questions posed by the present study, as well as the limitations and strengths of the research methods. Subsequently, Chapter 9 will conclude this thesis with a summary of the findings, their implications for policy, and future research directions.

## CHAPTER 8

### DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study highlight the role of social learning in the perseverance of gender normativity. Additionally, they provide insight into how gender normativity may be disrupted via social learning, paving the way for more authentic societal acceptance of TGNC youth. Both sources of secondary data were highly beneficial in answering the research questions posed by this study. This chapter will detail the answers to these questions, followed by a discussion on the limitations and strengths of this study.

In response to the first research question (How can transphobic ideals and actions be explained?), transphobic ideals and actions can be explained through the social learning of gender normative values, beliefs, and rhetoric that lead to unfavorable perceptions of TGNC youth. Community members who opposed the PSD gender diverse policy clearly displayed retention of these harmful ideologies in their responses, as well as the motivation and ability to reproduce such values and pass them along to their children through live and verbal modeling (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Moreover, participants largely believed they and their children had reason to fear TGNC youth, who would be permitted to share gender segregated spaces with cisgender students. The rhetoric, or “gender panics” depicting the TGNC population as deviant or predatory have been in existence for quite some time and often result in tangible physical and emotional harm for gender diverse youth (Buist & Stone, 2014; Stone, 2018).

The opposing group’s responses also proved invaluable in answering the second research question (How are transphobic ideals and rhetoric discussed?). Transphobic ideals and rhetoric are discussed in a variety of ways by those who adhere to the gender binary. First, the socially

learned gender normative beliefs that lead to such harmful ideals were framed by many adherents as fundamental to their religion and morality. Moreover, they expressed the belief that they and their children had legitimate, constitutional rights to teach and adhere to such ideals, even at the expense of TGNC youth who are gravely harmed by them. Participants attempted to justify this ideology with outdated yet traditional arguments that conflate biological sex with gender identity (Buist & Stone, 2014; Zeeman et al., 2017).

Opposers also relied heavily on transphobic rhetoric that depicts gender diverse youth as dangerous predators, arguing that a gender diverse policy would endanger them or their children (Biegel, 2018; Buist & Stone, 2014; Stone, 2018). Finally, in expressing their gender normative viewpoints, opposers of the policy displayed clear indifference to the needs of transgender youth, as they do not conform to the ideals they have learned, live by, and wish to pass on to their children (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Shaffer, 2009).

The townhall meetings with queer community members were essential in answering the third research question (How do transgender/gender nonconforming youth navigate discrimination and marginalization?). According to participants, TGNC youth navigate discrimination and marginalization through reliance on safe spaces, safe people, and solidarity with other queer students who experience similar hardships at home and school. Through association with accepting family members, teachers, and peers—particularly in spaces that are welcoming and free of judgment and discrimination—TGNC youth are able to temporarily escape the dominant gender normative culture that perpetuates the harms they face, seeking solace in the emerging culture of acceptance. Additionally, these students may form their own social circles with fellow “rebels” and “comrades.” Because TGNC youth have little motivation to participate in the socially learned culture of gender normativity, these social groups are

beneficial in that they provide a supportive, protective environment in “The Battle” against intolerant and hostile staff and peers (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963).

Both sources of secondary qualitative data provided essential insight in answering the fourth and final question (Can the cultural transmission of pro-trans values serve as a protective factor for transgender/gender nonconforming youth?). It appears that the cultural transmission of pro-trans values, or a culture of acceptance and affirmation, have great potential to serve as a protective factor for TGNC youth. In the public school district community meetings, the strongest evidence for this came from those in support of the gender diverse policy. Many supporters discussed the importance of getting to know gender diverse youth, as doing so helped them realize that they are just children, much like their gender conforming peers in a number of ways. Some of these supporters, in fact, claimed that their fears surrounding TGNC youth were erased upon getting to know these children and their parents. Through active association with TGNC youth, who simply model their own usual behavior, many misconceptions about this population are shattered as others take the time to get to know them. Prior research on social learning and direct interaction with gay and lesbian peers supports the idea that such associations promote more positive, accepting attitudes of marginalized and misunderstood populations (Swank & Ruiz, 2010).

Moreover, those who model acceptance toward TGNC youth, such as the teachers, parents, and peers discussed by participants in the townhalls, have the potential to transmit this culture to others. This may occur through verbal modeling, or actively explaining to others that they have nothing to fear from gender diverse youth and encouraging them to interact with this population. Live modeling may also be effective; as others are exposed to this accepting culture and the interactions with TGNC youth that occur in its wake, they are more likely to learn, retain,

and model such acceptance themselves (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Swank & Ruiz, 2010).

Both data sources, as well as prior research, confirm the importance of acceptance and inclusion, which indeed serve as protective factors for TGNC youth at risk of mental health, academic, social, and legal problems stemming from the greater gender normative culture (Katz-Wise et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2013; Singh et al., 2014). Through the social learning elements suggested by the data, this culture could spread at a much faster rate as acceptance and affirmation are more openly modeled in school settings.

### **Limitations**

While qualitative data and analysis are appropriate and feasible for answering the above questions, there are, nonetheless, limitations to the research methods that should be addressed. These limitations pertain to the subjectivity of qualitative methods, the use of secondary data, the presence of overt observers at the townhall meetings, the cross-sectional nature of the study, and the generalizability of both data sources.

In qualitative research, in which the researcher analyzes the words, thoughts, and perceptions of others, there is always a risk of subjectivity impacting the data. It is sometimes difficult for qualitative researchers, who often base their research on social phenomena that reflect their own backgrounds, interests, and situations, to remain wholly objective during the analytic process. This is no different for the present study, meaning that there is a possibility that the perceptions of the researcher influenced themes uncovered and conclusions drawn during the qualitative analysis process (Schutt, 2015). There is also little guarantee of interrater reliability, or the extent to which two or more persons analyzing the data agree on the measurements or conclusions drawn from the analysis (Saal, Downey, & Lahey, 1980; Schutt, 2015), as only one

researcher conducted the analyses for the present study. However, it is important to note that the public school district meetings were transcribed in teams twice; this increases reliability to a certain extent. Moreover, the qualitative townhall notes were taken by a team of undergraduate and graduate student researchers. Thus, the notes analyzed in the current study include the observations of several researchers from two different departments, thereby adding consistency and multi-disciplinary interrater reliability to the findings.

Another relevant limitation pertains to the researcher's use of secondary data in the current research project, as the data utilized were not originally collected for the purposes of this specific study. However, while the public school district meetings and townhalls were not conducted with the specific research questions and theoretical framework of the present study in mind, both data sources nonetheless relate to societal perceptions of gender normativity and the importance of gender inclusivity in improving the lives of TGNC youth, making the data reasonably appropriate for this study (Schutt, 2015).

The townhall meetings with TGNC/queer community members were conducted in the presence of overt observers, or researchers who announce their role as observers to study participants. A limitation to this practice is its potential to alter observed social situations. It is not natural for groups to be observed or studied. Thus, the mere presence of researchers may have impacted the responses and discussions offered by the participants (Schutt, 2015). Nonetheless, Schutt (2015) maintains that overt observers, for the most part, seem to be ignored by participants after some time and likely have little impact on the interview process.

The present study is cross-sectional in nature, meaning that the data were collected at just one point in time. This limits the study in that there is no way to guarantee the internal/causal validity of the research, or a conclusion that X leads to or causes Y. In other words, without the

use of longitudinal research that documents changes in experiences and perceptions of participants over time, there is no way to guarantee that the cultural transmission of gender normative values resulted in or caused the perceptions of public meeting participants or the experiences of those in the townhall meetings (Schutt, 2015; Weisburd, 2003). However, the detailed insight gained from TGNC/queer persons, a specific and understudied population that is well equipped to provide key information (Schutt, 2015), as well as the thoughtful comments from participants of the community meetings, indicate that gender normativity has and continues to be a pervasive issue and central cause for concern regarding the wellbeing of TGNC youth.

Lastly, this study is limited in its generalizability/external validity, or the ability of its conclusions to hold true for the entire population being studied (Schutt, 2015). While the public school district community meetings consisted of many participants across four different high schools, these schools shared the same state, metropolitan area, and school district. Perceptions of these community members may not hold true for citizens of other parts of the United States, where gender normativity may play a lesser or greater role in opinions on TGNC youth.

For example, the state of the research project ranks very high in regard to pro-LGBTQ legislation, falling into the category of “Working Toward Innovative Equality” in the Human Rights Campaign’s State Equality Index (Warbelow, Avant, Kutney, 2019). This is reflexive of a state culture that is more accepting of the LGBTQ community than others. However, TGNC youth experiences, as well as perceptions of this population, may vary greatly in other regions of this state. Research indicates that LGBTQ residents of more rural areas, for example, may experience higher levels of discrimination and minority stress than those who reside in urban areas (Israel, Willging, & Ley, 2016). The townhall meetings, which also took place in the same city and school district boundary, pose similar issues with generalizability based on location.

The samples for the townhall meetings also limit the generalizability of this study. Both samples were very small and consisted of participants who specifically sought out services from and chose to participate in the meetings at the non-profit organization. Small sample sizes do not typically produce samples representative of an entire population, particularly when random probability sampling methods are not employed. The participants of the townhalls were not randomly selected for the meetings, but chose to participate. This process puts the study at risk for systematic bias, or the over- or underrepresentation of population characteristics (Schutt, 2015).

Additionally, persons who utilize services from LGBTQ-serving organizations may not have the same experiences and perceptions as those who do not seek out such services, which further biases and limits the generalizability of the present study (Schutt, 2015). For example, those who frequent such organizations and chose to participate in the townhalls may have more family acceptance, social support, and self-confidence than other gender diverse community members. Some may be unwilling or unable to attend events at these organizations due to mental health, lack of permission from their guardians, or any number of barriers associated with the discrimination and marginalization they face. This study has no way of capturing the perceptions of such community members.

### **Strengths**

Regardless of the aforementioned limitations, both qualitative data sources utilized in this study provide in-depth insight that would not be possible with quantitative research methods or larger sample sizes. The townhall meetings are useful in that TGNC persons, who are the greatest experts in their own experiences with discrimination, marginalization, and victimization, were consulted via participatory action research methods, with the idea of identifying and devising

solutions to problems this population faces in school settings (Burns et al., 2011; Schutt, 2015). Additionally, the transcripts are helpful in exploring the perpetuation of gender normativity, particularly among opposers of gender inclusive school policy. There is a dearth of literature that actively seeks the perceptions of people who express gender normative or transphobic ideology. The present study examines these perceptions among community members speaking out against a proposed gender diverse school policy, offering rare insight into how gender normativity and transphobic rhetoric are discussed and maintained.

The use of secondary data also provided noteworthy benefits to the current study. For example, the public school district transcripts allowed the researcher to capture the authentic perceptions of multiple community members without their knowledge or direct participation. Such perceptions may not have been obtained using survey methods or conducting interviews, as participants' responses could have been influenced by the researcher's presence or the way questions were asked (Schutt, 2015). The ease and efficiency of secondary data also served as a benefit to the present study, allowing the researcher to obtain valuable insight from community members without the time and resources required to conduct a new investigation (Schutt, 2015).

Additionally, this study is a valuable addition to the literature in that it seeks to understand the perpetuation of gender normativity and TGNC youth mistreatment from a theoretical standpoint. Prior TGNC youth research is largely devoid of theory and thus unable to provide a systematic examination of the origins and perseverance of harmful gender normative beliefs and rhetoric (Schutt, 2015). Utilizing social learning theory to guide the research, this study delves into the mechanisms by which gender normativity and the mistreatment of TGNC youth are learned and culturally transmitted throughout society. Conversely, this theoretical framework also serves as a potential mechanism for disrupting gender normativity and its

associated negative consequences, informing future research on the social learning of gender normativity and TGNC acceptance.

This study will now turn to the final chapter, which will begin with a summary of the findings. Next, policy implications and future research directions will be discussed. The chapter will end with concluding thoughts about the importance of disrupting gender normativity to improve the lives of TGNC youth.

## CHAPTER 9

### CONCLUSION

Gender normativity is alive and well. This was made apparent by responses on the opposing side of all four public school district community meetings, who expressed gender normative beliefs, misconceptions, and damaging rhetoric as well as a desire to freely transmit these values and ideologies to their children. Many participants, in fact, were so determined to maintain gender normative values that they perceived the proposed gender inclusive policy as an active threat to their and their children's rights, values, and safety. In expressing their opposition to the policy, participants also displayed indifference toward the needs of TGNC youth, as well as the benefits that inclusive school policy would provide them.

The negative effects of gender normativity are also apparent from the responses of supporters at the community meetings, who discussed how gender normative beliefs lead to real physical, psychological, and academic harm to TGNC youth. These consequences were confirmed in both townhall meetings, with participants describing overwhelmingly negative school experiences, from bullying and verbal abuse at the hands of their peers, to differential treatment and discrimination from teachers, to the mental health problems, academic difficulties, suicidal ideations, and feelings of isolation that resulted. These findings are supported by previous research on the discrimination and marginalization faced by TGNC youth, as well as the negative outcomes resulting from their mistreatment (Collier et al., 2013; Greytak & Kosciw, 2014; Katz-Wise et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2010; Palmer & Greytak, 2017).

The data also demonstrate the necessity of inclusive policy, along with genuine acceptance and affirmation of gender diverse students. Those on the supporting side of the

community meetings discussed the moral imperative to implement the proposed policy and accept TGNC youth, as well as the positive consequences that ensue when such acceptance and inclusion occur. Along with favorable mental health and social outcomes, the importance of getting to know TGNC youth was stressed, as doing so serves to demonstrate that they are merely children, with aspirations and desires quite similar to those of most cisgender youth. The participants in the townhall meetings confirmed this, discussing the importance of safe spaces, accepting teachers, and protective and welcoming peers, who helped them navigate the difficulties that come with being gender diverse and/or queer-identified. Prior research also supports the utility of such inclusivity in promoting more favorable outcomes for TGNC youth (Kosciw et al., 2013; Singh, 2013; Zeeman et al., 2017).

The difficulties that warrant the need for safe spaces, private bathrooms, and protection would not exist in the first place, however, if not for the hostile school environment that is created by people who cling to gender normative beliefs (Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018; Zeeman et al., 2017). Townhall participants described their perfect school day as one free from bullying, discrimination, and misgendering, as well as the ability to express themselves according to the gender with which they identify. Accommodating such desires is not special treatment, nor does it take away from other students' freedom to exist authentically and express themselves at school.

It is thus imperative to dismantle the gender normative beliefs that continue to exist in spite of the introduction of gender diverse school policy, as policy does very little without true acceptance and affirmation from parents, teachers, peers, and the communities that accommodate these vulnerable youths (Katz-Wise et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018; Simons et al., 2013; Zeeman et al., 2017). Until such "fundamental changes in society" can

occur, the townhall participants offered valuable insight as well as suggestions for how school can become more inclusive and welcoming for gender diverse youth. Their ideas included: greater advocacy from adults in both schools and communities, equitable enforcement of anti-bullying policies, greater access to clubs and safe spaces, increased training for school staff on issues of gender diversity and mental health, campaigns to increase awareness of gender identity-based bullying, and assistance and education for the bullies themselves.

### **Policy Implications**

The present study has important implications for policy, as gender normativity remains a pervasive aspect of society that serves as a barrier to the wellbeing of TGNC youth (Buist & Stone, 2014; Zeeman et al., 2017). While the introduction of gender inclusive policies is a step in the right direction, the data suggest that it alone is not sufficient. Many who opposed the policy demonstrated that they were unwilling to accept it, or the identities of TGNC youth, on the basis of its implementation alone. Furthermore, the participants of the townhall meetings asserted that school experiences had not improved, even after the policy was put into effect. This suggests that along with inclusive policy, the most viable solutions must also involve attempts to promote the acceptance and affirmation of gender diverse youth.

One possible solution could be the implementation of more safe spaces and inclusive clubs, particularly those with an emphasis on the arts, for TGNC youth on school campuses. Participants in both townhall meetings stressed their significance, as well as the importance of greater access to such spaces, which provide safety as well as acceptance and inclusion (Kosciw, 2013; Singh, 2013; Zeeman, 2017). Increased access to safe spaces may also increase the visibility of TGNC youth among peers as well as staff, particularly in spaces and clubs that include gender conforming youth and cooperation among multiple staff members. These efforts,

through social learning mechanisms, may foster meaningful connections and the cultural transmission of acceptance through association with TGNC youth. Teachers and students who learn acceptance may subsequently, through reciprocal determinism, facilitate the disruption of gender normativity further by modeling such acceptance outside these spaces as well (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Swank & Ruiz, 2010; Van Hoorn et al., 2016).

Consistent with prior research, participants of the townhall meetings also stressed the importance of school staff listening to and addressing the concerns of gender diverse students, as well as education and training for staff pertaining to gender diversity and mental health (Kosciw et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2018). Collaborations between schools and agencies that serve TGNC and queer youth may prove useful, as adult advocates and representatives could provide such training to school staff while ensuring that gender diverse and queer youth have their concerns adequately addressed. Additionally, such representatives may be able to provide insight on how to assist and educate students who victimize TGNC youth, offering a more compassionate response to bullying that was supported by many participants of the second townhall meeting.

While it is apparent from the data that some staff members, who wholly adhere to gender normative values, may not be immediately receptive to such efforts, such collaborations may prove useful in swaying those who are more open to learning about and helping TGNC youth but do not know where to begin. Collaboration between youth advocacy programs and schools could thus be essential in the fight to dismantle the social learning of gender normativity (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Walters, 1963; Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

The Internet and social media were identified by townhall participants as important tools for TGNC and queer youth, as they provide education, resources, uplifting stories, and

connections with other queer students that are not easily accessible at home or school. The participants' responses highlight the Internet as a virtual safe space that may prove invaluable in disrupting gender normativity. Increasing awareness of and access to such virtual spaces on school campuses is one possible way to accomplish this. Collaboration among supportive teachers, community advocates, and TGNC youth themselves could result in the creation of comprehensive websites and social media accounts that include access to resources, education, and connections with queer youth on campus, the community, and beyond.

Additionally, flyers and posters that advertise these virtual safe spaces could be utilized by supportive teachers, counselors, and librarians who wish to display them in their classrooms and offices for interested students. While physical safe spaces and clubs are crucial in promoting the acceptance and affirmation of TGNC youth (Kosciw et al., 2013; Singh, 2013; Zeeman, 2017), the addition of school-sanctioned websites and social media accounts could supplement such spaces, particularly for students who are unable or not ready to join clubs or ask for resources in person.

Finally, the public school district transcripts revealed a surprising amount of TGNC youth support from religious community members and organizations. This suggests that while religious beliefs continue to facilitate the transmission of harmful gender normativity (Stone, 2018), religion also has the potential to disrupt such beliefs. Religious leaders and organizations who disavow the rhetoric associated with TGNC youth and wholly accept this population should collaborate with schools and community advocates to help promote the cultural transmission of love and acceptance for gender diverse students. The cooperation of religious organizations may resonate with reluctant staff and students who cite religion as the reason for their gender normative beliefs. Thus, the reconciliation of religion, inclusive policy, and TGNC acceptance

and affirmation may be crucial in the disruption of gender normativity.

### **Future Research Directions**

Future research should further explore the relationship between social learning and gender normativity, particularly in how this theoretical framework may assist in the disruption of gender normative values. The present study provides an important starting point for such endeavors. However, studies with larger sample sizes and more diverse TGNC community members, across multiple regions of the United States, could expand on this study's findings and identify solutions tailored to students whose communities may require more ambitious efforts to combat the greater gender normative culture (Schutt, 2015). Future studies should also involve community members who previously held gender normative, anti-TGNC values but have since come to accept this population. Such research could provide important insight into how participants came to abandon their previously-held views in favor of more accepting ones. Their input would thus be invaluable in understanding the social learning of TGNC acceptance and affirmation.

While Bandura's social learning theory provides a solid foundation for examining the relationship between gender normativity and perceptions of the TGNC population, this micro-level theory is limited in scope in that it explores social learning at an individual, interpersonal level (Cullen, Agnew, & Wilcox, 2017). For example, its primary emphasis is on the transmission of ideals and behaviors between family members, peers, and other influential individuals in one's social circle (Bandura, 1977; Bandura & Walters, 1963). As such, future research should also examine how macro-level social learning theories (i.e., theories that explore how social structures and institutions influence and shape society) may explain the perpetuation of and abandonment of gender normative ideology (Cullen et al., 2017). For example, Ronald

Akers's social learning theory of crime includes a social structure and social learning (SSSL) model to outline how one's position in a society or community, sociodemographic characteristics, and groups they belong to may predispose them to participation in criminal activity (Akers, 1998; Cullen et al., 2017). Because the present study's findings indicate that social-cultural systems, particularly religion, may play a crucial role in one's adherence to or denouncement of harmful gender normative beliefs, future studies may benefit from incorporating elements of Akers's SSSL model in order to truly understand the cultural transmission of gender normativity and TGNC acceptance on a large-scale, macro level (Cullen et al., 2017).

Additionally, future research should further utilize participatory action research (PAR) methods, including active and consistent involvement from TGNC participants themselves. The present study benefitted significantly from input provided by queer participants at the townhall meetings. However, future studies should foster even greater partnerships with TGNC community members, in which they take on the role of researchers as well as participants. Such efforts would offer the TGNC population greater opportunities to be heard and actively involved, from start to finish, in projects that produce targeted, meaningful solutions to the problems their communities are facing (Felner, Dyette, Dudley, Farr, & Horn, 2020; Proctor & Krusen, 2017; Wagaman & Sanchez, 2017).

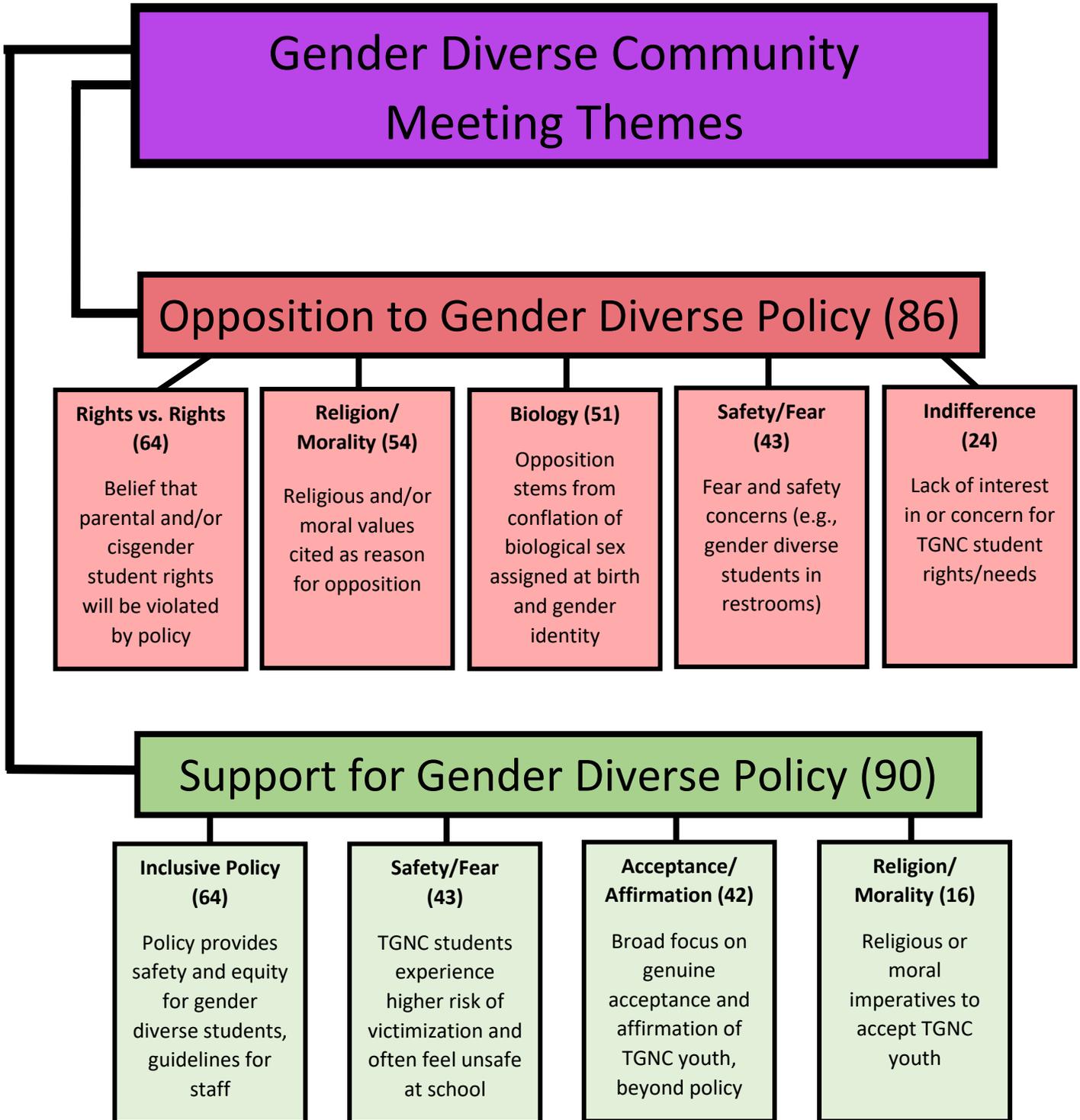
Gender diverse school policies are a crucial component to the annihilation of socially learned gender normative values. However, inclusive policy will do very little without the "fundamental social change" discussed by townhall participants. To effect such change, wholehearted and authentic acceptance of TGNC youth must occur. "The Battle" against gender normativity, as well as the harm and rhetoric it produces, is just beginning. Nonetheless, there is

reason to be hopeful that this battle can be won. Due to generations of the aggressive cultural transmission of gender normative values, this ideology remains prevalent in this society.

However, with an equally ambitious effort to promote the cultural transmission of acceptance, gender normativity can indeed be disrupted.

APPENDIX

THEMES EVIDENT AT PSD COMMUNITY MEETINGS



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## CURRICULUM VITAE

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### Education

#### University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Expected May 2020

- M.A., Criminal Justice
- GPA: 4.0

#### University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2018

- B.A., Criminal Justice, *Magna Cum Laude*
- GPA: 3.94
- Dean's Honor List: 2016-2018; 6 consecutive semesters

#### College of Southern Nevada, 2016

- A.A., Criminal Justice
- GPA: 4.0
- President's Academic List with High Honors

### Research Experience

#### Sex and Gender Diversity Research Project

- Dr. Emily Troshynski, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Criminal Justice; Spring 2019
  - Research on transgender/gender nonconforming youth
  - Reviewed transcripts and took notes at townhall meetings
  - Contributed to presentation on the needs of transgender/gender nonconforming youth

#### Independent Research Studies

- Dr. Emily Troshynski, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Criminal Justice; Spring 2018
  - Research on human trafficking victims
  - Read and annotated 40 research articles; Wrote 2 research papers
- Dr. Melissa Rorie, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, Criminal Justice; Spring 2018
  - Research on family acceptance of LGBTQ youth
  - Program evaluation involving survey development using Qualtrics software

### Professional Experience

University of Nevada Las Vegas

- Graduate Teaching Assistant – Department of Criminal Justice; 2018 – 2020
  - Assistance grading assignments and exams
  - Group lead for Tourism Safety and Crowd Science Research Lab
  - Screener for Department of Criminal Justice internship program